TALKING ABOUT NURSERY EDUCATION: PERCEPTIONS IN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The study explores perceptions of nursery education held by staff, parents and children in three state nursery classes in a single local education authority. I have adopted a theoretical framework combining ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992) and phenomenography (Marton, 1981, 1988a and 1988b) which have not been combined in previous research in early years education. Such a paradigm synthesis allows me to interpret perceptions within the *context* of the nursery class, of the broader social milieu and of the research process itself.

The research employs a variety of interviewing techniques, observation and documentary analysis. I have developed an interviewing technique specifically for the study in order to overcome some of the problems associated with obtaining young children's perceptions of their educational experience.

I consider textual representation of voice, context and processes as problematic, a situation which has effected a change in my epistemological position and my move towards postmodernism. Therefore, I present the research within the *context* of my development over time.

The research suggests that young children are able to voice their *own* perceptions of their nursery education, and that these perceptions, and children's ability to voice them, may be influenced by certain characteristics of the nursery class setting. Also illustrated is the complex and *relative* nature of adult perceptions, which must be considered within their situational and temporal context.

In Loving Memory

of

My Mother

Violet Ellen Rose Sleeman (née Joachim)

Born: 11th July 1920
Died: 30th July 1973

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own unaided work. Any views expressed are my own and not those of the University Bristol or of Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education.

Pauline Evans 19/12/97

Pauline Evans

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Part One: The Study

Chapter One

Introduction

In this thesis I explore perceptions of nursery education held by staff, parents and children in state nursery classes in a single local education authority. The study was conceived and carried out in a period when the Conservative Government espoused market forces as a means of producing 'quality' in education. There were suggestions that such marketing was to be applied to nursery education through the introduction of a voucher scheme which would allow the parents of all four-year-olds to 'buy' nursery education for their children. (The voucher scheme was both introduced and abolished during the course of the study).

The study involved three major phases:

- a preliminary study in two nursery classes ;

- a survey of all accessible nursery classes in the LEA;
- in-depth study in three nursery classes.

The preliminary exploratory study, together with a review of the literature, generated the following research questions:

- What perceptions do nursery class staff, parents and children hold of nursery education?
- How are these perceptions situated in context?
- What processes *might* be involved in their development?

In the early stages of the study, I adopted a theoretical framework combining ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992) and phenomenography (Marton, 1981, 1988a, 1988b). Phenomenography decontextualises data whereas ecological systems theory requires a contextually-bound research model. The combination of the two approaches permitted participants' perceptions to be interpreted within the context of the nursery class, of the broader social milieu and of the research process itself.

During the third phase, I aimed to empower my participants as much as possible in order to give 'voice' to those whose opinions might otherwise go unheard. This aim underlies the decision to use different types of interviewing technique for the three groups - staff, parents and children. Because of the ethical and practical problems associated with gaining young children's perceptions, I devised an interviewing technique involving role play which enabled me to interview children in the

classroom (Evans and Fuller, 1996). In order to contextualise perceptions, I also conducted observations in the classroom and carried out documentary analysis on available written LEA and school policies.

The study went through a series of changes throughout its course. Perhaps the most significant change was in my epistemological position - my movement from positivism, through postpositivism and, during analysis and writing which I considered problematic, towards postmodernism. I acknowledge Stronach and Maclure's (1997) contention that educational researchers might bear allegiance to a particular epistemological position, and yet adopt those issues within a postmodernist stance which may be relevant or useful in their research. Whilst admitting to being a 'postmodern neophyte', I would place myself within the category which Rosenau (1992) labels 'the affirmative postmodernists', and which she explains thus:

> As substitutes for the 'scientific method', the affirmatives look to feelings, ... personal experience, empathy, emotion, intuition, subjective judgement, imagination, as well as diverse forms of creativity and play ... (p.117).

Scheurich (1995) points out the importance of recognising the 'conscious and unconscious baggage' (p.249) researchers carry, and that readers should be made aware of 'what the researcher brings to the research enterprise' (p.250). Throughout the thesis, I have referred to, and made issue of, the interaction between my biography and the research process. Considering these issues, together with Rosenau's notions of affirmative

postmoderism, I offer some background information on my 'self' in Chapter Two.

Whilst many voices are given a hearing in the thesis, among *my* many voices (Ronai, 1992), two are most influential in the work - 'Scientist Me' and 'Dramatist Me'. These two voices have resulted in the thesis being, what might be described as, a 'celebration in multiplicity'.

I present the thesis in four parts. In Part One I introduce the study, giving an overview of the methodology in Chapter Two. Part Two provides a 'backdrop' for voices, and describes the macrosystem (the broad social milieu etc.) in Chapter Three, and the microsystems (the nursery classes) in Chapter Four. In Part Three participants in my study talk about nursery education - staff in Chapter Five, parents in Chapter Six and children in Chapter Seven. Finally, I provide a 'chorus' in Part Four, bringing voices together in Chapter Eight and offering my reflections on the research in Chapter Nine.

Chapter Two

Methodological Overview

A Reflexive Journey

Introduction

I present this chapter in two sections. In Section One I consider the research design, methods and techniques, together with the theoretical framework for the study and the decisions which I made as the research progressed. Section Two highlights the major analysis techniques which I used for the last phase of the study, together with a consideration of the writing of the thesis.

Section One

Starting my journey

My boarding pass

Considering Weinstein-Shr's (1990) notions of the research process, my account of the adoption of the theoretical framework, research design, procedures and techniques employed in my study, together with underlying epistemological and ontological arguments in support of my decisions, could be considered as a journey. But before my journey commences, I must declare my 'baggage' (Scheurich, 1995, p.249). My early attempts to summarise relevant aspects of my biography gave rise to a lengthy account. I finally decided upon an economical version - a poem which incorporates major points which are expanded as appropriate later in the thesis.

Isn't It Strange?

Isn't it strange
That I should be here
Doing this?

Isn't it strange?

From the working classes,
Of female gender,
And rather hard of hearing

Isn't it strange?

I was a teacher
In a secondary
Teaching sciences; no degree.

Isn't it strange?

But lurking inside
Was what I wanted to be,
A producer of plays on stage.

Isn't it strange?

Then, at home,
A mother of three,
Doing chores, and running playgroup.

Isn't it strange?

Back into teaching,
But this time primary,
Teaching science, drama, art ... and all!

Isn't it strange?

Did my Master's.
The world became quieter.
Could not give up studying.

But at 48?!

Isn't it strange
That I should be here
Doing this?

Having declared my baggage, I will now attempt to take the reader with me and retrace my steps as I travel through the research process. But my journey has been, and is, multidirectional, multimodal, multifaceted and multivoiced. And as I have travelled, the shackles of positivism have loosened their grip allowing me to cast them aside ... almost. My journey can be described as:-

reflexive, iterative *- continually questioning myself, my intentions; repeatedly returning mentally to a place which I have visited, each time carrying slightly different baggage.*

hermeneutic *- attempting to make sense and interpret my lived experience of the research process.*

developmental *- travelling away from the icefields of the objective positivists towards the rich, warm pastures of the postmodernists.*

physical *- like a nomadic explorer, literally travelling from place to place.*

emotional *- the highs, the lows, the very lows; serendipitous findings, disappointments; the involvement, partiality, affective energy investment.*

deconstructive, reconstructive *- breaking down my preconceived ideas regarding research, and adopting a different way of 'looking'.*

At the start of my journey I was influenced by my scientific background. I was concerned with objective facts; there was a reality out there which could be measured. Travelling along a winding path I have visited and revisited, side-tracked and returned to course, my perceptions and ideas changing as I progressed. Whilst comparable to an expedition, it certainly has not been a package tour, and I find myself agreeing with Packwood and Sikes's (1996) assertion that research as recipe is a myth, admitting that what I started out to do evolved into something rather different.

On my itinerary were three major stopovers representing the phases of my research.

Phase One - preliminary explorations in two nursery classes, ongoing and summative analysis.

Phase Two - survey of all nursery classes in the LEA; observation and informal interviews with staff; piloting of child interviews; ongoing and summative analysis.

Phase Three - in-depth study of three nursery classes; observation and semi-structured interviews with staff, parents and children; ongoing and summative analysis.

These phases evolved during the course of the study, each phase informing the next, and did not form a preplanned framework with predetermined methods and procedures, characteristic of quantitative methodologies (Walford, 1991).

Arriving at the departure gate: gaining access

In the early stages of my research I was concerned with pre-school children's task-oriented behaviour. Previous research (Jowett and Sylva, 1986) indicates that nursery class graduates are better task-oriented than playgroup graduates when they start school. I wanted to compare the behaviour of children in these two types of provision *before* they moved on to school.

I wrote to the chief education officer of an LEA I knew to provide nursery education, giving details of my proposed research. He referred me to the LEA primary inspector, Mrs Grant, who offered me a 30 minute meeting in order to discuss my research. During this meeting Mrs Grant revealed that 24 nursery classes were operational and that a further 10 were to be opened during the following six months. At the time of our meeting, the LEA had only admission policies for nursery classes. No other policies had been drawn up relating to nursery education, and in-

service training for nursery teachers was virtually non-existent due to 'lack of funding'. Mrs Grant agreed to allow me to conduct research in the authority, but said that I would have to approach the individual schools myself. Following our meeting, the chief education officer issued me with a formal letter giving permission to work in the authority.

The first stage of gaining access had taken 10 weeks, and I still had not approached schools. Letters, which gave some details of my research and some information about myself, were sent to the headteachers of four randomly selected schools in the authority with a view to conducting exploratory observations in their nursery classes. I did not want to be construed as being an 'expert' (for I certainly was not), nor as someone who was working on behalf of the LEA, since both these notions might handicap entry into the settings, and also have deleterious effects on relationships with participants. Hence, I tried to take these issues on board when writing my letter and in giving information about myself. I indicated that I would telephone during the following week to discuss the possibility of making a visit. Two headteachers agreed to allow me to carry out research in their nursery classes, one refused access, and the fourth did not answer the telephone on the many occasions I tried.

PHASE ONE: Swimming in a primordial swamp

Whilst access was being sought to do research in nursery classes, I began developing a systematic observation schedule, working in a playgroup which was run by a former colleague (I had formerly been a playgroup supervisor). In my 'baggage' was a background steeped in behaviourism - I had studied operant conditioning in young mice for my main subject dissertation over twenty years earlier - and therefore my research methodology at this point was akin to an ethological approach (Hinde, 1992) in which I took on the role of a detached, 'objective' observer.

Once access had been gained to the two nursery classes, I visited them for one or two sessions each week for a twelve week period. I began refining the observation schedule using a combination of techniques developed in other studies (Roper and Hinde, 1979; Sylva et al. 1980; Campbell, 1987). Using Campbell's (1987) timing sequence, I coded behaviours of individual children every 10 seconds for a 10 minute period. Considerable practice was needed in using the schedule, as coding decisions had to be made quickly.

Whilst my observational skills were improving, I was not satisfied with my method of data collection. In analysing the data I realised that they did not represent what was actually happening. I began to write detailed descriptions of the children's activities after completing the 10 minute observations.

A change in direction

I began to rethink my route, and check on my baggage. The numbers did not represent what I was seeing and experiencing. Although I had been a playgroup supervisor, I had not had experience of a local authority nursery class. My involvement in the settings was, in itself, a learning process for me. There was much happening which might be considered as taken for granted by those who actually operated within the settings (Spradley, 1980), and which I could not record through systematic observation. I discarded my observation schedule and began to take field notes as a means of recording my general observations, and conducting more focused observations (Spradley, 1980; Robson, 1993) on individual children's activities. My role in the research process was of 'observer-as-participant' (Adler and Adler, 1994, p.379), for I was interacting with actors in the settings, informally interviewing staff and talking to the children, taking part in some routine activities, such as washing up and reading stories, but also spending considerable amounts of time engaged in note-taking, during which I generally maintained a detached role. However, from the children's point of view I could have been considered as a participant whilst observing, since they were used to being observed by NNEB students.

My two nursery classes differed on a number of attributes. In common with most educational research, nursery classes are often grouped together as a sample, under the premise that they offer similar experiences for children (see for example, Jowett and Sylva, 1986; Lera et al., 1996), and compared with other forms of provision such as playgroups. Exceptions are the ethnographic studies conducted by Lubeck (1985) in the USA and Hartley (1993) in the UK. However, both these studies compared nursery centres and schools (Lubeck, two and Hartley, three) which had different social-class and ethnic populations. My nursery classes had similar populations and were in the same LEA, but, as mentioned earlier, differed on a number of characteristics: Class 1 was better resourced and had a larger classroom than Class 2; activities were more teacher-directed in Class 2 than in Class 1; Class 1 parents came into the classroom, but Class 2 parents stayed outside the classroom.

At this point in my research, I felt as if I was drowning in the primordial swamp; so much unstructured data, so much to observe and record. Adding to my feelings of insecurity was my faulty auditory processing. I was unable to clearly understand some of the verbal interaction occurring in the classes, and my observations were mainly of visible activities. I was not a suitable researcher for an intensive

ethnographic study requiring a prolonged stay in a setting, since I missed so much information. Feeling myself sinking into the mire, I decided to re-think my route and take another course.

Collecting baggage and re-routing

I checked my baggage again. My previous research (Evans, 1993) had involved a questionnaire survey of parents in four primary schools, seeking their opinions on the characteristics of good schools. Parents' opinions appeared to be influenced, to some extent, by the type of school their children attended. I therefore decided to explore the perceptions of nursery education held by staff, parents and, if possible, children in different contexts. Looking through my baggage again, I discovered Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1992) ecological systems theory which I had met during my Master's course. I decided to revisit Bronfenbrenner, since his theory stresses the importance of the perceptions people hold of their environment and that these perceptions impact upon development. His research model also takes account of development in *context*.

Bronfenbrenner revisited

I wanted to explore perceptions of nursery education held by parents, staff and children. Obviously, perceptions *develop* over varying periods of time, and it was this factor which caused me to consider Bronfenbrenner's theory as a framework for my research.

Firstly, I need to explain why I, a female, should adopt a male-generated theoretical model for my research, and therefore compare some of my 'baggage' with that of Bronfenbrenner. Like Bronfenbrenner, I have an interest in natural history, and so a theory of ecological systems resides happily amongst my existing constructs. Also, we share congruent views in that we deplore methodologies adopted in many developmental psychological studies which employ a deficit, pathological construction of the child and which examine 'the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.19). Bronfenbrenner points out that this type of research fails to take account of the effects of the setting in which it is conducted.

Bronfenbrenner's theory needs to be considered within the context of his own development over time. His first version of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), is that most often adopted as a theoretical framework in research (for example, Lassbo, 1995; Woodhead, 1996). But Bronfenbrenner later revised some of the concepts of his theory in the light of 'scientific evidence and argument' whilst asserting that 'the basic elements and imperatives of the paradigm not only still stand, but are further strengthened and extended' (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p.187). Yet, to date, I have not found a study which has employed his revised theory.

In discussing ecological systems theory, I will consider aspects from the original (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the revised (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) versions, highlighting the basic concepts, together with my own interpretations which have informed my study.

Firstly, I will consider Bronfenbrenner's definition of human cognitive, social and emotional development, which considers development as:

> ...the set of processes through which properties of the person and the environment interact to produce constancy and change in the characteristics of the person over the life course (1992, p.191).

Bronfenbrenner (1992, p.190) provides a formula to represent development which considers the issue of time, thus:

$$D_t = f_{(t-p)}\,(PE)_{(t-p)}.$$

D = developmental outcome

(PE) = person and environment

f = the function or operator

t = the time at which the developmental outcome is observed

$_{(t-p)}$ = the period, or periods, during which the joint forces, emanating both from the person and the environment, were operating over time to produce the outcome existing at the *time* of observation.

Ball (1990) contends that time is rarely taken into account in ethnographic research. Hence, I felt it was important to consider my study in its temporal context, taking account of historical factors, as well as possible contemporaneous changes occurring as my study progressed.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserts that an ecological model of development portrays humans as active agents, interacting with the settings in which they live, the process of development being affected by the relationships between the settings, and 'by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded' (p.21). However, Bronfenbrenner (1979) points out the reciprocal nature of the interaction between the person and the environment; an individual acts on the environment, whilst the environment acts upon the person. He identifies 'ecological niches' which may be 'favourable or unfavourable for the development of individuals with particular personal characteristics' (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p.194). These ecological niches result from the interactions of a group of systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992): the microsystem (the most proximal), the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem.

Bronfenbrenner's (1992) revised definition of the *microsystem* is as follows:-

> A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical and material features, *and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief* (1992, p. 227 - original emphasis).

The words in italics represent Bronfenbrenner's revision of the definition of the microsystem which highlights the importance of the attributes of significant others in the setting in which an individual is interacting. Bronfenbrenner (1979) stresses that the term 'experienced' is critical in

the definition of the microsystem. He maintains that how individuals *perceive* their environment is of great import for:

> The aspects of the environment that are most powerful in shaping the course of psychological growth are overwhelmingly those that have meaning to the person in a given situation (1979, p. 22).

Therefore, how an individual perceives her/his environment affects her/his development. This phenomenological perspective, Bronfenbrenner (1979) admits, has similarities with the work of other theorists such as Husserl and Mead. However, their theories do not take account of the wider social structures which may influence the context in which the interactions are occurring, whereas ecological systems theory does recognise these factors.

Interestingly, Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues against investigations which employ field work, such as those adopted in anthropology, for he contends:

> ...the descriptive material in these studies is heavily anecdotal and interpretation of causal influences highly subjective and inferential (1979, p.18).

Yet later Bronfenbrenner asserts the need for a *process-person-context* model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1992) to be applied to research concerning human development. The processes involved in the development of an individual and the context in which an individual is developing need to be taken into account. My own interpretation of this model, together with Bronfenbrenner's revised definition of the microsystem, suggested certain modes of data collection for me. Countering Bronfenbrenner's criticism

of the descriptive nature of field work, I felt that a detailed description of the setting in which perceptions were developing, obtained through observation and taking field notes, would serve to capture the context and the processes occurring in that setting. Having previously abandoned a rigid systematic observation schedule, I felt further encouraged to adopt a descriptive mode of data collection.

I decided to seek participant perceptions of nursery education through semi-structured interviews. Information gained through interviews, combined with the data collected through observation, would help to reduce problems of inference alluded to by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Despite Bronfenbrenner's phenomenological perspective, and emphasis on the importance of the perceptions individuals hold of their environment, he bases his discussion on development in early childhood on studies which have employed systematic observation (for example, his chapter 'Day Care and Pre-school', 1979, p.164-205). Indeed, Bronfenbrenner (1988) indicates that whilst studies of development of older children have utilised verbal reports, those of infants and young children rely on observational techniques. Therefore, it can only be assumed that researchers must *infer* young children's perceptions through observation. I hoped to challenge this notion. My research would combine observation with more direct attempts to seek the perceptions young children hold of their nursery class.

Whilst I focused my research on the microsystem, if adopting an ecological model, I needed to consider interactions with the broader social context, the meso-, exo- and macrosystems, which I will now briefly describe.

Bronfenbrenner's original definition of the *mesosystem* remains unchanged in his revised theory, which is as follows:

> The mesosystem comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person (e.g. the relations between home and school, school and work place, etc.). In other words, a mesosystem is a system of microsystems (1992, p.227).

A mesosystem research model would consider, for example, development occurring in the home and the school. However, Bronfenbrenner (1986) points out that whilst many studies explore the effects of home experience, or of home-school relationships, on performance and behaviour in school, few consider how school experiences affect children's behaviour at home.

I wanted to explore only *interactions* with the mesosystem but felt that to conduct observations of children and parents in their homes was too intrusive, and a situation in which I would personally not feel comfortable. By interviewing parents I hoped not simply to explore the links between home and school, and the influence of these links on their perceptions of nursery education, but also their perceptions of any changes in their children which were apparent outside the nursery setting.

Bronfenbrenner's original definition of the *exosystem* also remains unchanged in his revised theory, and is as follows:

> The exosystem encompasses the linkage and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that influence processes within the immediate setting that does contain that person (e.g. for a child, the relation between the home and the parent's work place; for a parent, the relation between the school and the neighbourhood group). (1992, p.227)

At this point in my study, I felt there were few exosystem interactions I could explore. In-service training of staff warranted consideration, since this provided a situation in which significant others were experiencing a setting which might influence people as they develop within the microsystem. I also felt that staff training and career background could be considered, as these offer external experiences which may influence others in the nursery class. Other exosystemic interactions would be considered during the analysis of interview data.

Bronfenbrenner adds to his definition of the *macrosystem* in his revised theory, thus:

> The macrosystem consists of the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other broader social context, *with particular reference to the developmentally-instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, life styles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in each of these systems.* The macrosystem may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture, subculture, or other broader social context (1992, p.228 - original emphasis).

Again the italicised words, represent Bronfenbrenner's revision of the definition of the macrosystem. Whilst the label 'macrosystem' might be considered analogous to the terms 'culture' and 'subculture' (e.g. social class, gender, ethnic group), Bronfenbrenner (1992) points out that the latter 'do not typically connate such social structures or institutions as neighbourhoods, cohorts, family types, or systems of day care or education' (p.230). Bronfenbrenner further emphasises similar belief systems, sets of values, social and economic resources, life styles etc. which evolve to produce different macrosystems.

Since I was concentrating on the microsystem as a site of development, in-depth description and analysis of the macrosystems was not possible, nor required. As stated earlier, I explored possible macrosystemic *interactions* and therefore the following were considered in my research design, data collection and analysis:

- social class of populations of the microsystem;
- gender;
- LEA policies and practice relating to the provision of nursery education;
- *past and present* government policies relating to the provision of nursery education;
- media coverage (TV and newspaper) which might be considered as exerting influence;
- philosophical and psychological theories relating to nursery education which might permeate systems of belief of those involved.

Summary of the implications of Bronfenbrenner's theory for my research

My aim was to explore the perceptions participants hold of nursery education. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offered me a

framework for considering those perceptions in context, and also for exploring some of the processes in their development.

I concentrated my research on the *microsystem*, collecting data through observation and semi-structured interviews with staff, parents, and children. As a result of my experiences in the preliminary study, observations were both *general* and *focused*, although the situations for my focused observations were informed by findings in the second phase. Any written school policies relating to nursery education were also collected and analysed.

Mesosystem interactions (home-school) were explored through interviews with parents and staff, and through observations of staff-parent interactions. Exosystem interactions were considered through the analysis of interviews with staff and parents.

Possible macrosystemic interactions are listed above. Data were obtained relating to the social class of populations, more details of which are given later in this chapter in the section describing the third phase. I also obtained LEA and current government documents relating to nursery education, and took account of media coverage at the time of the study. A review of the literature gave me a brief overview of the historical context, together with some of the philosophical and psychological underpinnings to nursery education.

PHASE TWO: The Grand Tour: a survey of all accessible nursery classes

As mentioned above, the two nursery classes in which I had been working offered different characteristics. I went back through my field notes, looking for salient themes and items of difference and similarity. These items were used to inform the next phase of the study in which I explored the extent to which this diversity in provision was repeated throughout the LEA by means of a survey of all accessible nursery classes. The purpose of this survey was two-fold: it provided me with both quantitative and qualitative information on the nursery classes from which I could select a sample (at this stage Scientist Me wanted 10) for further study, and it gave me an overall picture of the provision of nursery education in the LEA, and hence an indication of macrosystem influence.

It was at this point that I began keeping a research journal. Initially, this served to record events, ideas and plans for changes in my research. Gradually, as my research progressed, it became more like a personal diary in which I recorded my thoughts and feelings.

Gaining access to nursery classes

After another meeting with Mrs Grant, the LEA primary inspector, (one and a half hours, with tea and biscuits) during which the new focus of my research was explained and permission to proceed agreed, 30 nursery classes in the LEA (i.e. excluding the two already visited) had to be contacted in order to arrange visits. I sent letters together with details about myself, to 4-6 schools each week, as a means of managing the task

of follow-up phone calls and arranging visits. Schools were contacted by telephone in the week following the dispatch of the letters in order to discuss access and arrange a visit to the nursery class. Twenty five schools agreed to allow me to visit; 5 refused access on the basis of having 'too many visitors recently'. Each class was to be visited for one session (morning or afternoon). I could not visit all the nursery classes for the same session (i.e. all morning sessions or all afternoon sessions) because they were well-spread geographically, and therefore in some cases, two nursery classes had to be visited within one day. Some headteachers and nursery teachers actually specified that they preferred me to make a visit during a certain session. Some nursery classes opened for only one session (morning), including the two which were most distant from my home (60+ miles).

Data gathering

As this was a survey, a systematic method of data gathering was appropriate. I compiled a checklist of items/questions to be considered in the nursery classes (see Appendix A1) which ensured collection of similar data from each setting. Since data were organised in preset categories during collection, analysis was simplified. Items on the checklist included salient factors arising from my preliminary study; these were:-

a) size of classroom

b) facilities

c) equipment and resources

d) staffing

e) teaching and learning styles

f) types of activities in which the children were engaged

g) effect of the National Curriculum

h) pressures from other staff in the school

i) management of behaviour

j) amount of contact children have with adults

k) parental involvement

l) transition from home to school

m) entry into main school

I also included on the checklist some characteristics of early childcare settings which Pascal (1993) suggests are possible indicators of 'quality' (some of these indicators also emerged in the preliminary study and are mentioned above). I, therefore, included the following items/questions from Pascal's framework:-

a) organisation of space

b) curriculum - what does it contain? is there progression?

c) aims and objectives

d) equal opportunities policies

e) monitoring and evaluation

f) assessment and record keeping

g) how are staff deployed?

h) how is learning managed?

In addition I included on the checklist descriptions of the catchment area, socio-economic features of the school population, size and type of school and the number of terms the children typically experience in the nursery class.

Piloting the checklist

I initially employed the checklist in the first two nursery classes visited in order to determine whether:-

a) all the information could be gathered in one session;
b) any other salient items might become apparent;
c) other data gathering methods needed to be employed.

I endeavoured to arrive at the schools before the start of sessions so that I could talk to headteachers about the project and also observe the children's arrival. Because each period of observation lasted for only one session, there was insufficient time to interview staff formally. Most information on curriculum, record keeping etc. had to be collected through informal discussion while staff were working. Since there was insufficient time to discuss 'monitoring and evaluation of practice' and 'policies for equal opportunities', these items were removed from the checklist, but were to be considered in the next phase. Similarly, *in-depth* discussion on aims and objectives were not possible. Most of the data collected on the checklist were overt in nature i.e. resources, facilities, teaching and learning styles. Any salient comments made by staff during informal discussion were recorded on the back of the checklist. I realised that the quickest method of recording the organisation of space was to draw a floor-plan of the classroom on the back of the checklist (see Appendix A2 for examples). These plans proved to be a valuable source

of information, for they refreshed my memory of what I had observed during the visits.

As a result of the piloting exercise, the checklist was revised for use in the remaining classes in such a way that a manageable amount of data could be collected within the time limits (i.e. a full A4 size sketch plan of the classroom would be drawn and the sections on monitoring and evaluation, and equal opportunities were removed). However, despite the alterations, each data collection exercise proved to be quite demanding.

Using the information collected from the survey, I wrote descriptions of each nursery class (see Appendix A2 for examples of descriptions). I also compiled descriptions of the classes visited during the preliminary study, analysing my field notes using the criteria on the checklist, and included these in the overall findings of the survey.

Analysis of survey data

As the data had been collected in preset categories on the checklist analysis was relatively easy. After visiting 10 nursery classes I began to build up a cross-case matrix (Miles and Huberman, 1994) in order to systematise the data and provide a general overview. A typology was emerging regarding 'style of teaching and learning' and 'openness to parents', there appearing to be three main categories for each. (I adopted the term 'openness to parents' since this served to describe the *degree* of parental involvement). However, as I visited the remaining nursery classes

using the typology I had created as a point of reference, I had to redefine these categories. Eventually, '*style of teaching and learning*' could be classified into five categories, whilst '*openness to parents*' formed four categories. The completed cross-case matrix appears as Table 1 in Chapter 3.

The *style of teaching and learning* was particularly difficult to categorise. The general patterns observed were as follows:-

I. **mainly free-play; little intervention** - the children were given a completely free-choice of activity; there was no set curriculum or topic planning and adults took on a supervisory role (low levels of adult interaction).

II. **mainly free-play; adult intervention/support (topics)** - the children were generally given a free choice of activities; adults circulated and supported the children as they worked; activities were structured around a half-termly/termly topic; there was at least one whole class or half class carpet session.

III. **mainly free-play; adult intervention/support (child-centred)** - as for II above, but a topic or theme was only used as a starting point, children's interests being picked up and followed.

IV. **adult direction; some free-play** - children were directed to activities in which they received adult instruction; a free choice of activity was allowed when the children had completed the adult-directed activities; long carpet sessions.

V. **adult direction; some free-play; formal academic input** - as for IV but children were seen to be completing worksheets, tracing over scribed sentences or working on the school maths and language schemes.

The four general categories evident with regard to *openness to parents* were as follows:-

I. **against involvement of parents** - generally against involving parents; parents were seen to arrive and leave or collect their children, there being little interaction with staff. Staff made comments to the effect

that they did not want parents in the classroom; some made derisory comments about some groups of parents.

II. **indifferent or no encouragement for parents to become involved** - parents were seen to arrive and leave in the same manner as for I above; staff were indifferent with regard to parental involvement; in most classes children could borrow books to take home.

III. **some encouragement for parents to become involved** - parents walked freely into the classroom and lingered at activities in which their children were engaged; staff chatted to parents and body language was relaxed (lots of smiles and tactile responses); some operated home visiting schemes; books could be borrowed and taken home.

IV. **active involvement of parents** - as for III above but parents were actively encouraged to participate in the work of the classroom.

Checking my baggage for the last stage of my journey

My 'Grand Tour' had ended. I could now reflect on what I had done and seen on my travels. But at this point, Scientist Me was being rather pessimistic about the outcomes of the Grand Tour. Whilst descriptions of variables such as buildings, resources, organisation of space etc. might be considered credible, such assumptions could not be made about data collected as the result of observing teaching and learning styles and interactions between staff and parents. To what extent were staff and children affected by the presence of me as an observer? Certainly, one teacher who was seen to be operating a 'formal' style of teaching and learning admitted that she had been dreading my visit and was worried about being observed. Had she organised a 'formal' session because she feared that the children might 'appear' not to be doing very much or that they might misbehave in a more 'informal' session? Would a second or third period of observation have yielded an account of what *usually*

happened in her classroom? Unfortunately, it was not practicable to visit nursery classes for more than one session due to the distances involved and constraints on time.

Besides considering the impact of observer effect, *observer effectiveness* should also be considered. I perused the checklists once observations had been completed and realised descriptions of afternoon sessions were less detailed than those for morning sessions, and that there appeared to be less detailed information on the checklists used for observations in the last six or so nurseries. With reference to the first problem, I had visited some classes for an afternoon session having spent the morning carrying out observations in another class. In most cases I had had to make an early morning start in order to get to morning sessions before the parents and children arrived. Then, when visiting a class for an afternoon session, I had to dash out during the lunch hour in order to find and get to the second school before the session started. My powers of observation may have been somewhat reduced due to tiredness during the afternoon session. Regarding the second problem (i.e. less detailed information collected towards the end of the survey), the possibility that I may have habituated to the use of the checklist might be considered (note the presence of behaviourist constructs in my baggage). The use of some questions had become routine and the last group of classes were similar to others I had visited such that little 'new'

information was forthcoming; categories had become 'saturated' (Hutchison, 1988, p.137).

On the positive side, there did appear to be patterns in my data. Descriptions of the categories given earlier served to operationalise 'style of teaching and learning' and 'openness to parents' for the last phase of my research. These two attributes were the most salient differential characteristics of the nursery classes visited and were influential in my selection of nursery classes (microsystems) for the next phase of my research. My observation skills had further improved, as had my informal and semi-formal interviewing skills, such that, as researcher as 'primary research tool' (Ball, 1990, p.157), I felt more confident in my ability as a data gatherer. I had also developed a technique for interviewing the children in the classroom, a full account of which is given later in this chapter.

I decided to start by initially selecting *three* nursery classes for further study with the intention of studying more. In the event, after my research in the third nursery class, I stopped collecting data. My research in the three settings yielded large amounts of information, and also my epistemological stance was in a state of metamorphosis.

The criteria used for the selection of the three nursery classes were as follows:-

- size of classroom, facilities and resources;
- openness to parents;

- style of teaching and learning.

These attributes were those which exhibited the greatest diversity across all the nursery classes visited during the survey and might be considered as offering differential contextual characteristics and processes within the nursery class. Each nursery class could be considered as a microsystem in which perceptions were developing. Detailed descriptions of the three classes are given in Chapter Four. The view through my 'binoculars' was more focused. I could see the fields I was about to enter, although I still carried positivist constructs in my baggage.

PHASE THREE: Entering the fields and talking to inhabitants

Passing through the gates: gaining access to three classes

I decided to telephone the schools I had selected to discuss details of my research project and seek permission to conduct my research. Having already visited the nursery classes during the survey, and having gained permission to observe for one session, I thought that gaining access for the next stage of the research would be relatively easy. This was the case for two schools, Harrington and Catsbury (pseudonyms), both of which I had considered to be open to parents. However, having selected a school which I considered to be closed to parents, access was not so easy to obtain. In the first such 'closed' school approached, the headteacher said she could not allow me to interview parents because of the 'sort of parents' which used the school. Feeling rather disappointed, I selected

another school, Fiddlebrooke Infants' (pseudonym), which fulfilled the same criteria as the one originally selected for its lack of openness to parents, except that the classroom was bigger and had better facilities. But the headteacher also seemed reluctant for me to interview parents. When I told her I wanted to interview parents to gain an understanding of their perceptions of nursery education, she replied, 'Oh, the type of parents we have here won't know anything about that'. She eventually agreed to allow me to conduct the research after hearing that I had already interviewed parents in a similar catchment area who had been most forthcoming. However, she specified that I would not be able start until the second half of the following term.

I sent information to each school outlining the techniques I was to use to collect data and arranged to make a preliminary visit to further discuss the research.

Planning my itinerary in the fields

I was not sure, at the outset of this phase, how many visits I would need to make to each nursery class. As a result of my research in the first school, six visits seemed to be sufficient to collect data. Since children seemed to be tired during the afternoon sessions and, hence, were not very forthcoming in pilot interviews, I decided to visit only during morning sessions. An outline of my plan for visits is given below:-

Visit 1.

i) Discuss research with nursery teacher and indicate criteria for selection of parents for interviews.

ii) Ask for class list of occupations of principal wage earner in each family.

iii) Give nursery teacher letter about research to distribute to parents.

iv) Observations in classroom

Visit 2.

i) Observe arrival of parents and children at start of session.

ii) Introduce myself to the parents selected to take part in the first focus group and explain what will happen during the interview (if possible).

iii) Interview children.

iv) Observe and make field notes on activities in the classroom.

v) Give out confirmatory notes to selected parents.

Transcribe child interviews; conduct preliminary analysis of field notes.

Visit 3

i) Observe arrival of parents and children at start of session.

ii) Meet parents selected to take part in second focus group (if possible).

iii) Conduct first focus group interview with parents.

iv) Interview one member of staff (if possible).

v) Observe activities in the classroom.

Break of at least two days in order to transcribe focus group interview and, if possible, staff interview, and carry out initial analysis.

Visit 4

i) Observe arrival of parents and children and meet parents selected for third focus group (if possible).

ii) Conduct second focus group interview with parents.

iii) Interview one member of staff.
iv) Observation in classroom.

Break of at least two days.

Visit 5

As for visit four.

Give nursery teacher "Thank you" cards to distribute to parents.

Transcribe all remaining interviews.

Visit 6

i) Give staff their interview transcriptions and discuss.
ii) Ask, if possible, at least one parent from each group to look through the focus group interview transcript, and verify the contents.
iii) Observation in the classroom.

Conducting observations

I conducted observations in a variety of researcher roles. As a participant observer (Spradley, 1980), I supported children in some of their activities, whilst taking a mental note of what was happening elsewhere in the classroom and scribbling field notes at every available opportunity (which on several occasions, like King (1984), I did in the staff toilet!). As a non-participant observer (King, 1984), I tried not to interact with the children, and wrote field notes for general and focused observations. The children accepted my 'detached' role quite well, as children had done in the survey, for they were accustomed to being observed by NNEB students. Combining these two types of observation meant that I could

be of use as an 'extra pair of hands', not putting staff under the pressure of having a rather obvious, perpetual 'note-taker' in the classroom, and yet intermittently I could step back to write field notes. My focused observations concentrated on incidents which demonstrated the style of teaching and learning and openness to parents, operationalised during the survey. I focused on the arrival of parents and children, carpet sessions, outdoor play and craft activities plus other incidents which seemed to demonstrate the style of teaching and learning, and used these observations to compile vignettes (Erickson, 1986).

Planning to talk to inhabitants

Two issues influenced my decision to use interviewing as a means of collecting information on participant perceptions of nursery education. The first was my interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979; 1992) which adopts a phenomenological perspective in which the perceptions individuals hold of their environment impacts on their development. A 'face-to-face verbal interchange' (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p.361) was therefore likely to yield information on the subjective experience of those involved in nursery education. The second influence was my use of a Likert questionnaire in previous research (Evans, 1993) in order to seek parents' perceptions of the qualities of good primary schools. Whilst the questionnaire was based on parents' qualitative responses to open-ended questions in an initial exploratory

survey, the resulting data lacked sufficient detail about context and developmental process. Much richer, detailed information might be obtained through interviewing, for participants would be given the opportunity to enlarge on their responses, and also have questions clarified by the interviewer (Cohen and Manion, 1989).

I checked my baggage. I had taken modules in counselling psychology for my Master's degree course, and had become interested in the work of Carl Rogers. A critical analysis of Rogers's humanistic person-centred theory compared with behavioural theory for one assignment may have been responsible for my first steps away from the behaviourist position.

Whilst accepting the very different nature of the goals of the therapeutic interview compared to that of the research interview, much regarding the behaviour of the researcher and counsellor might be considered similar. Rogers's non-directive interviewing methods, in which the counsellor provides a relationship in which there is *genuineness, 'unconditional positive regard'* for the client and *'empathetic understanding'* (Rogers, 1957, p.96) seemed congruent with my own beliefs regarding the *ideal* characteristics of human interaction. I personally do not sit happily in an 'experts' role, and so, with regard to power positioning, usually prefer to adopt an equal position. Therefore, the non-authoritative role of the counsellor/interviewer in Rogers's approach (Corey, 1991) suited my own personal stance. But, since I had

specific areas around which I wanted participants to talk and express opinions, I could not rely on my interviews being totally unstructured and non-directive as in Rogers's approach. However, the form of interview I wanted to adopt did not fit neatly into the typology of the respondent interview and the informant interview suggested by Powney and Watts, (1987). In the respondent interview, the interviewer controls the whole interview process through a structured schedule, whilst in the informant interview, the interviewee sets the agenda. As mentioned above, I needed to gain information on specific areas relating to my research. However, I did not want to control my participants, but wanted to *empower* them as much as possible. In this way I hoped to work towards achieving what Lather terms 'catalytic validity' (1986, p.67), in which the research process itself might encourage thoughtful reflections and responses.

I wanted participants to talk and express their own views, their own perceptions of reality, rather than be prompted or coerced by my questioning. Hence, for interviews with staff and parents I constructed a semi-structured interview framework of open questions which were derived both from my research questions and from issues arising from analysis of my survey data. The interview protocol adopted for interviewing the children similarly aimed to encourage the expression of their own views.

Burgess (1984a) indicates the problems he encountered in his role as a researcher in a school in which he was 'about ten years senior to

some of the pupils .... but twenty years junior to some of the teachers' (p.105). He also mentions problems of his status within the school hierarchy, having never been a senior teacher. I was in a similar situation in that I had many different groups of participants whom I wished to interview - young children (4-year-olds); parents (mothers and fathers; mixed age groups, but likely to be younger than me); staff (headteachers, nursery teachers and nursery nurses). I realised that I would have to adopt different interviewing techniques for the different groups.

I decided to conduct individual interviews with staff and focus group interviews with parents. In order to overcome some of the practical and ethical problems associated with interviewing young children, I developed an interviewing technique specifically for the study.

Talking with staff

Due to the hierarchical relationships existing amongst the staff (nursery nurse, nursery teacher and headteacher), interviewing in groups did not seem appropriate, since some might feel intimidated or restricted in such a situation. Also, there would be practical problems in trying to organise group staff interviews due to their varying commitments throughout the school day. Therefore, it seemed more fitting to interview staff individually.

Cooper (1993) discusses problems of field relations when doing research within schools, and indicates that by:

> emphasising the teacher's expertise and showing an awareness of the difficulties involved in articulating craft knowledge, a collaborative relationship was established (p. 326).

I was concerned about staff attitudes towards me as a researcher. Having recently left teaching, I was aware of the opinions that many teachers have regarding those associated with higher education, considering them to be 'ivory tower' theorists who are out of touch with the day to day stresses and practicalities of teaching. I would therefore have to disclose much of my own background experience (my baggage). Since I had never been a nursery class teacher, then I would definitely not be considered an 'expert' in the field. However, I had had recent experience of teaching the National Curriculum and was actually teaching when it was first introduced. Whilst the nursery teachers and nursery nurses were not involved in teaching the National Curriculum as such, they were under increasing pressure from other staff to acknowledge and work towards it. Therefore, having 'been there' myself, I was able to empathise with their problems of its implementation. Similarly, I had witnessed the day to day pressures placed upon headteachers since the introduction of LMS (Local Management of Schools) and felt able to discuss and sympathise with their plight.

I was also aware of other pressures under which staff work. For primary school teachers, time is precious, and I realised that trying to interview nursery staff would be particularly difficult as they have no mid-

session break and are usually in constant contact with the children. Interviews would therefore need to be short. I also hoped to interview other staff in the school, in particular the headteacher and reception teacher. During my preliminary study and survey, nursery staff had indicated that other staff in the schools were either very supportive of what was happening in the nursery, or had perceptions as to the aims and purposes of nursery education which were not congruent with those of the nursery staff. However, whilst the headteachers were willing to be interviewed, the nursery teachers seemed unhappy about me approaching other members of staff, saying that they were very stressed and would not want to take part. I did not feel I could push the issue, and was grateful for the co-operation which the schools had volunteered.

No new questions arose from my ongoing analysis of transcripts, a situation which may have been due to some questions being derived from informal interviews with 27 nursery teachers, and almost as many headteachers, during the preliminary study and survey (see Appendix A3 for staff interview framework). My role in interviewing the staff had to be adapted according to the roles adopted by each group, and is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

Talking with parents

Many of the parents of children in the nursery classes I studied who were 'working-class' and living on council estates, may have felt intimidated by

the formality of individual interviews within school surroundings. I did not consider it appropriate to interview parents in their homes, since I personally felt this would be too intrusive. In such a situation, I might be identified with a member of social services, or someone else in an official capacity. I decided that focus group interviews in schools would serve as the most appropriate means of gaining the information I required.

Nyamathi and Shuler (1990) define the focus group interview as:

> ...a qualitative research method for gathering information, [which] when performed in a permissive nonthreatening group environment, allows the investigation of a multitude of perceptions on a defined area of interest (p.1282).

Focus group interviews give rise to data which are emic in nature, that is data which are generated through the minimum imposition of the researcher, as opposed to etic data, which might arise through the use of a tightly structured interview schedule or a questionnaire (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). I felt that the possibility of creating an informal environment provided by a focus group in which parents might be permitted to freely express their *own views*, would be the most appropriate means of gathering data.

Selecting participants

Rather than ask for volunteers, I wanted to select participants according to various criteria which I will now discuss. This selection process was carried out in collaboration with the nursery teachers.

The groups were to contain a 'social mix' which, if possible, was representative of the population of the nursery class. Since the population of each class was not too diverse with regard to socio-economic group, I hoped there would not be so great a difference between group members as to cause alienation or feelings of superiority/inferiority. I assessed the 'social class' of the families using the nursery by asking the nursery teacher for information concerning the occupation of the principal wage earner in each family, and classifying them using the Registrar General's Classification of Social Class (OPCS, 1991). The populations fell into Social Classes IIINM, IIIM, IV and V (Harrington and Fiddlebrooke had a *very small* proportion of families in Social Class II). However, the classification can only be considered arbitrary since in some families both parents, or the single parent, were unemployed, and school records did not contain any information about previous occupations. I also asked the nursery teachers for information about the type of housing in which the families lived, as this helped with assessing social class. Bourdieu (1985) points out that 'classes on paper' nurture the:

> ...intellectualist illusion that leads one to consider the theoretical class, constructed by the sociologist, as a real class (p.723)

He maintains that what is present is 'a space of relationships' in which 'moving up means raising oneself, climbing, and acquiring *the marks, the stigmata,* of this effort' (p.725) [my emphasis]. Therefore, I classified

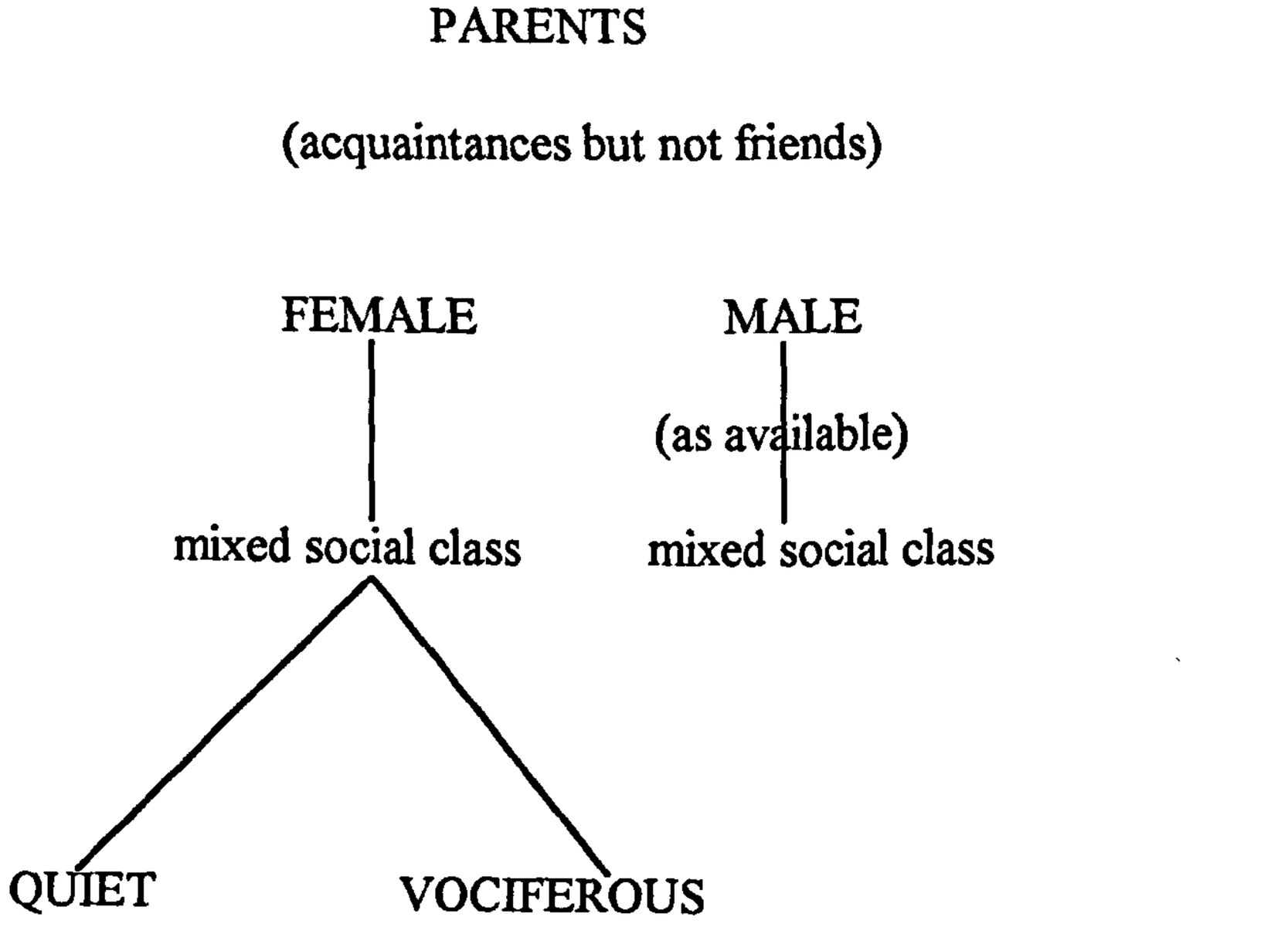
focus group participants who lived in private housing, 'middle class', and those who lived in council housing, 'working class'.

I decided to use single-sex groups since Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) suggest that 'Diversity of opinion expressed in a mixed-sex group might be smaller than that expressed in a single-sex group' (p.44). There was a possibility that female participants might be perceived as having greater expertise in, and knowledge of, the topic of nursery education, than male participants. This situation could either inhibit the latter, or cause the discussion to move into an area in which the men felt confident.

Personality was another factor I had to consider when selecting those to be interviewed. Krueger (1994) points out that some group members might be quieter than others and may feel oppressed by more vociferous participants, hence affecting group dynamics. I therefore decided that, if possible, I would try to invite quiet participants (as indicated by the nursery teacher) to one group and vociferous/loquacious parents to another.

Krueger (1994) maintains that focus group participants should be unknown to each other, since this factor may affect the extent to which participants voice their opinions. This criterion could not be fulfilled since all the parents were acquaintances to varying degrees. Therefore we took care not to select participants who were close friends, as the discussion might possibly be dominated by their own exclusive exchange of views.

The above criteria for selection could only be applied to female respondents. Male participants were selected from a restricted population since only those who were unemployed, worked shifts or were in employment which had flexible hours would be able to come along for the interview. The selection procedure is summarised below:-



Age was not considered a sufficiently diverse variable to take into account since, in the population of parents, the age spread was approximately ten years and, after all, they did share a common factor, that of parenthood.

Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) recommend a group size of 6-12 participants, and Nyamathi and Shuler (1990) recommend 7-10. However, a colleague had warned me that she had experienced problems in transcribing interviews with more than four participants due to difficulty in distinguishing their voices. I anticipated problems with

transcription due to my hearing loss and, since I was working within a phenomenological model, it was important not to separate 'voice' and 'person'. I therefore decided that four parents per group would be the optimum size. In the event, space imposed restrictions on numbers of participants.

Choosing a location for the focus group interviews

The location for conducting the focus group interviews was an important consideration. Using an area which was part of the nursery seemed a better option than using another part of the school, such as the staff room (suggested by one nursery teacher). Parents would then be in familiar surroundings, and those who had young, pre-nursery-aged children could leave them in the classroom if they wished, having easy access to them should there be any problems. Small rooms are better for facilitating group interaction than large rooms (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Therefore, the nursery teachers' offices provided an ideal location for conducting the interviews. One nursery teacher did not have an office, so the 'home corner', situated in a corridor outside the main classroom, was used. Stewart and Shamdasani point out the importance of spatial arrangements, contending:

> ...seating a group in a circle, or in a fashion where all group members can easily see one another, will facilitate discussion and reduce the tendency of particular members of the group to emerge as dominant (1990, p.48).

Some reorganisation of the rooms was necessary before the interviews. Chairs of the *same size and height* (chosen so that no participants were allowed to become dominant by virtue of being physically positioned above others, or, alternatively, feel self-conscious) were arranged in a circular fashion, and a small table was positioned in the middle of the room. The table served as a resting place for the tape recorder and for participants' cups of coffee. I hoped to create as relaxed an atmosphere as possible, in order to facilitate discussion. Whilst Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) suggest the possibility of using video as a means of recording focus group interactions, I felt, like Morgan (1997), this would be too intrusive, instead opting to make field notes after all participants had left.

I have discussed aspects of my role as an interviewer above, but consider my position within the focus group worthy of further discussion. At the outset of this phase of the research, I lacked confidence about myself as an interviewer/moderator, perceiving the role to be a difficult one, a perception endorsed by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), Krueger (1994) and Fontana and Frey (1994). Fontana and Frey contend 'the interviewer must balance the directive interviewer role with the role of the moderator, which calls for management of the dynamics of the group being interviewed' (1994, p.365). Whilst, I did not want to be so directive that I controlled participants, I realised that I would have to discourage dominant participants and encourage those who were passive.

I felt that I should be a facilitator for the parents' discussion, empowering them to voice their opinions. I practised my moderator skills with groups of student teachers before entering the field, but admit to feeling quite apprehensive about my first group interview with parents.

My mode of dress was an important consideration. Wearing a 'very smart' jacket or suit might give me a 'professional' or 'expert' appearance which might well intimidate some parents. I therefore decided to dress fairly casually in a jumper and skirt. I further tried to make parents feel at ease by offering coffee and tea at the start of the interview, and then 'disappearing' so that they had a short period when they could chat amongst themselves and become acclimatised to the surroundings. During this time, parents were asked to write their first names on an adhesive label and attach it to their clothing. Using this labelling, I was able to write down the names of speakers at the start of the interview, which aided identification of voices during transcription.

A short introductory talk by me gave the participants an overview of the research and some information about myself. I talked about my own three children in order to share my 'baggage', for I wanted to be accepted by the groups as a parent, and hence a group member. At the outset of this phase in my research, I was still very much influenced by my positivist constructs, believing that I could remain detached and objective in my role as interviewer. Congruent with Husserl's philosophy, I thought, at this time, I could 'bracket' myself in the research process, and

hence suspend my 'various beliefs in the reality of the natural world in order to study the essential structures of the world' (Manen, 1990, p.175). Denscombe (1995) discusses research involving group interviews in which the interviewer revealed his own opinions on the topic under discussion. Whilst I did not adopt this stance, believing that I might influence participant responses, some of my beliefs *were* revealed during the discussions. I felt the need to be honest with participants, for ethical reasons, and also to maintain rapport.

Questioning participants

Krueger (1994) recommends the use of open-ended questions, since these reveal 'what is on the interviewee's mind as opposed to what the interviewer suspects is on the interviewee's mind' (p.57). The use of such questions was congruent with the phenomenological model within Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1992) ecological systems theory, adopted for the study. Krueger (1994) also recommends the use of a framework of questions to guide the discussion, whilst Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) advise that no more than twelve questions should be employed. I therefore constructed a schedule of just four questions for my first focus group. Analysis of the transcript revealed three additional issues in the discussion which seemed worth pursuing in other groups. Therefore, seven questions, formed my framework for the discussion in subsequent groups, there being no new issues raised (see Appendix A4 for interview framework).

Krueger (1994) stresses that focus group interviews should be transcribed as soon as possible after they have taken place whilst the event is still fresh in the interviewer's mind. I therefore began transcribing within hours of the interviews taking place, leaving at least two days between each to ensure that transcription could be completed (transcription is a particularly lengthy process for me due to my hearing loss). It was necessary to transcribe each interview before the next was conducted, or the task of distinguishing voices would have been unmanageable.

Talking with children

There are few reports in the literature offering techniques for communicating with pre-school children in research settings in order to ascertain their perceptions of, or opinions on, their educational experience (Langsted, 1994). This may be due to the fact that researchers may perceive data obtained through direct interviews with young children as lacking reliability (Lewis, 1992). In an exploration of children's play patterns in nursery and infant schools, Dunn and Morgan (1987) assert that obtaining information by directly interviewing such young children would not yield any useful data. David (1992) discusses the problems educators may encounter in obtaining young children's opinions on their early educational experience, and King (1984) describes his difficulties in trying to interview 5 and 6-year-olds. However, since children's

perceptions of their educational environment may influence their cognitive, social and emotional development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), attempts to ascertain those perceptions may be considered worthwhile.

Guidelines exist for interviewing children in clinical and legal settings (Vizard, 1987; La Greca, 1990; Westcott, 1992), such as providing a child-friendly environment, and using puppets, dolls or other toys as an interview medium. However, whilst acknowledging that some features of the methods used in clinical and legal settings might be applied in other contexts, the very different nature of the information to be obtained in such settings compared to that required in educational research, makes many aspects of these protocols inappropriate. Interviews with young children have long been employed within psychological research in order to assess children's cognitive and linguistic abilities, but much of this work has been conducted under 'laboratory' conditions.

Those studies which have attempted to seek pre-school children's opinions of their educational experience have involved individual interviews. Wolfgang and Phelps (1983) interviewed pre-school children individually in a room separate from the main classroom in order to determine their play material preferences. Paired pictures of play materials were shown to the children and they were asked to point to those which they preferred; the children did not have to speak and were compelled to make either/or choices. Such a means of obtaining

information may render the resulting data unreliable, since the children may not have had a preference for either of the materials illustrated in the pictures, or may have equally liked both.

Armstrong and Sugawara (1989) utilised a toy (a model of a day care centre) as a medium through which children could be interviewed about their experiences in their day care centres in the USA. Again, children were interviewed individually in a separate room or in a quiet corner of the day care centre. Interviews were tape-recorded, but if children made a non-verbal response to a question (e.g. head-nodding), then the gesture would be recorded through the use of notes. I considered such procedures to be inappropriate for my study, since the act of an adult taking a lone child into a separate room or quiet corner may instil confusion in the child with regard to when or when not to accompany a stranger.

Developmental considerations

Putting children into the interview situation may interfere with their ability to communicate. Intimidation by an adult may cause children to 'shut down' (Steward et al., 1993, p.27). Parker (1984) asserts:

> Researchers must consider the extent to which the interview is an intervention into the 'ecosphere' occupied by the child and whether or not the ecological ramifications justify the intrusion (p.25).

These issues reinforced my decision that, for the purpose of the present research, the children should be interviewed in the familiar surroundings of the classroom, thus providing an environment which might prove less

intimidating. Since young children's performance in tasks is improved if these tasks are 'embedded' in meaningful, real-life situations (Donaldson, 1978), conducting interviews in the classroom might enhance their ability to respond.

Hatch (1990) highlights problems which may arise in interviewing pre-schoolers as a result of their egocentrism. However, Warren and Tate (1992) point out that children 'are egocentric speakers in some contexts and not in others' (p.247). Task difficulty seems to be an important factor, and needed consideration in the development of an interviewing technique.

In creating an interview protocol to be used with young children I had to consider problems associated with the developmental level of their communication skills. Monosyllabic words are better understood than multisyllabic words (Wilson, 1995), as are sentences which contain fewer words (Steward et al., 1993). Three and four-year-olds may have a tendency to over-generalise the meaning of some words as a result of their limited vocabulary (La Greca, 1990) and may also conceive words which sound similar to have the same meaning (Wilson, 1995). Care needs to be taken when using questions which require the answer 'yes' or 'no'. Further probing may be required in order to find out if the child has fully understood what was being asked (Steward et al., 1993). Similarly, 'wh' questions, such as 'what, where and who' may exist in a child's repertoire at the age of three, but s/he may be unable to answer 'why,

when or how' until s/he is five or six years old. Steward et al. (1993) conclude:

> Interviewers can assume that the younger the child, the shorter the sentences the child will comprehend, the fewer verb-noun units per utterance, the fewer syllables per word and the more the child will depend on familiar contextual cues to glean meaning. (1993, p33)

Hughes and Grieve (1983) indicate that problems may arise from the fact that young children may attempt to answer a question, even though they may not understand it. The researchers asked two groups of children (8 five-year-olds and 8 seven-year-olds) some 'bizarre' questions, which the children attempted to answer. Hughes and Grieve (1983) suggest that those involved in questioning young children must view the child 'as someone who is actively trying to make sense of the situation he [sic] is in - however bizarre it may seem' (Hughes and Grieve, 1983, p.114).

In their research into conversations between pre-school children and their teachers, Wood and Wood (1983) demonstrated that adult questioning resulted in a decrease in the mean length of children's utterances in conversations, and apparent initiative in responses was reduced. Hence, Wood and Wood assert:

> questions are least effective in getting the required answer in sessions where there are too many of them. Too many questions, therefore, not only make children passive and terse, they also tend to depress their level of performance (1983, p.159)

Although Wood and Wood do not actually state what they mean by 'too many questions', their work does raise awareness of likely problems which might be encountered as a result of an adult questioning a young child. However, Wood and Wood do not maintain that the questioning of young children should be abandoned, but argue that the number of questions asked should be limited. Questioning, the Woods suggest, puts the adult in a position of *power*, for 'He [sic] who questions, controls and he [sic] who answers runs the risk of appearing ignorant' (1983, p.161).

The problem of adult power

I needed to consider the problem of adult power in the development of an interview protocol if both the content and length of children's responses were to be optimised. Inadvertent intimidation by an adult interviewer (Hall, 1996) and the fact that young children may conceive that an adult is always right (Bull, 1992), could cause children to offer incorrect or inappropriate information. I had to consider ways in which my power as an adult, and a stranger to the children, could be reduced. Certainly, individual interviews with children in separate rooms might enhance my 'power', possibly resulting in intimidation, again reinforcing the notion that this procedure may be inappropriate. The number of questions I used required limitation so that my 'power' might further be reduced.

A question of ethics

There are also ethical considerations to be taken into account when involved in research with young children. I have already mentioned the

inappropriateness of interviewing young children alone in separate rooms. Discussing ethnographic studies in education, Burgess (1989a) underlines the importance of the *voluntary consent* of the subjects, a particularly problematic issue when researching young children. Although parents and/or guardians may offer their consent for a child to participate, such an agreement may go against the child's own wishes, and her/his rights. Indeed, Burgess (1984b) asks 'What right, if any, do pupils and students have to withdraw from studies?' (p.259). The limited communication skills of young children may 'increase the danger of subtly, perhaps unintentionally, coercing relatively powerless individuals into social research' (Kimmel, 1988, p.70). Therefore, any interview protocol adopted for research use with young children should offer the subjects the maximum *freedom of choice* regarding whether to participate or not.

Kimmel (1988) reminds us that it is unethical to subject participants to experiences which might be stressful or promote anxiety. Such situations might easily arise whilst interviewing young children due to the unequal balance of power between the adult interviewer and the child.

Developing an interviewing technique during the pilot phase

Whilst visiting the nursery classes during the survey, I began trying out different interviewing techniques with the children. I first attempted to interview child volunteers in the classroom, with the children and myself seated at an activity table situated in a prominent position. However, few

children volunteered to be interviewed, and those who did looked uncomfortable and displayed body language indicative of stress (hair twisting, fingering of clothes etc.) Even though we were sitting at the same level on child-sized furniture and in surroundings familiar to the children, I was aware of my position of power and felt uncomfortable myself. The children's responses were short (usually one word) and they often tried to change the subject by uttering comments which were irrelevant to the interview.

I next tried interviewing the children using glove puppets and dolls. However, these toys seemed to distract the children's attention away from the task in hand; they wanted to play their own 'games' with them rather than engage in conversation with me. For example, one little boy dashed off to the home corner and collected a large 'Emu' puppet. He ran back and said, 'My puppet's going to eat yours!', and then proceeded to make his puppet devour mine, a rather small, fluffy elephant!

I abandoned the idea of using puppets and tried circulating around the classroom, talking to the children as they were engaged in their activities. Some children appeared somewhat inhibited by my presence and, therefore, groups of children were approached. However, when talking to groups of children, one child tended to dominate the discussion, with the other members of the group copying what s/he said 'parrot fashion'. For example, in one nursery class a group of boys and girls I

talked to were sitting around a table covered in puzzles. When I asked them what they liked about their nursery class, one little girl said 'I like these puzzles'. The next child said, 'The puzzles', as did all the other children sitting around the table. I wondered whether the children were taking cues from the activity in which they were engaged. However, when I talked to groups of children who were not actually engaged in particular activities, they acted in the same way, taking the lead from one child. Lewis (1992) demonstrates how group interviews might be successfully employed with ten-year-olds; however, as my study suggests, this technique may not be effective when used with much younger children.

Like Tizard and Hughes (1991), I experienced practical problems with audio-tape recording in the classroom. So much background noise resulting from the activities of 25+ four-year-olds in the classroom was present on the recordings, that I found transcription very difficult or impossible, especially with my hearing loss. I had to devise a method through which children could be interviewed in a relaxed manner, with the minimum amount of adult power, in a setting with which the children were familiar and which permitted audio-tape recording of the interview. The technique also needed to be such that children had freedom to choose whether to take part.

Using role play as an interviewing technique

Whilst visiting one nursery I noticed two children sitting in the home corner, talking to each other on telephones. Young children do not habitually sit down for the purpose of a conversation; but here I was observing two children involved in a type of role play which involved a sedentary conversation.

. After leaving the nursery I began thinking about the possibility of using telephones as an interview medium. During the next few days I managed to obtain two old push button telephones, one having a small receiver which was ideal for use by a young child. I took these telephones along on my next visit to a nursery class and asked the nursery teacher if I could try using the telephones to 'interview' the children for a short while. She agreed and, towards the end of the session, I set up the two telephones on an activity table. I sat by one telephone like a fisherman waiting for a bite. A little girl approached the table and began pressing the buttons on the small telephone as if making a call. I quickly 'pulled in my line' and picked up my receiver. As I began talking to her, her reaction was one of surprise. She looked at me for a moment as if I were an 'alien', but then pressed the buttons a few more times and began talking to me. We had a chat about what she had done in nursery class that morning and what she liked doing best. During our conversation other children noticed what was happening, approached the table and began to queue up to talk to me. I must admit to becoming more than

just a little excited at this point, for I had stumbled upon a technique for communicating with these young children which was relaxed, which they seemed to enjoy and in which they could *choose* to take part. Also it seemed that many of the children wanted to take part, which meant that I might be able to interview a large sample. My power as an adult was reduced since the children and I were talking at the same 'level' within the role play. The children themselves were empowered since they could simply put the receiver down and say 'Goodbye!' if they felt that they did not want to say anymore.

Although I must admit to feeling rather elated at my 'discovery' of the telephone technique, I still had one obstacle to overcome - the tape recording of the interviews. For several days my telephone technique lingered on my mind. Suddenly an idea came to me. What if I put microphones into the mouthpiece of the telephones and connected them to a tape recorder? The children and myself would then be speaking directly into the microphones, and our voices would perhaps be easier to distinguish against all the background noise. I purchased two small tie-clip microphones and inserted them into the mouthpieces. I later read of studies which had used 'bugged' telephones in order to record and analyse children's discourse in telephone conversations. These studies involved conversations between children and adult relatives who made telephone calls to their home (Holmes, 1981; Bordeaux and Willbrand, 1987), or telephone play involving individual children in the home corner

in pre-school (Hall et al., 1996; Gillen, 1997). However, despite an extensive literature search, I have been unable to find another study in which researchers use telephones as a medium for interviewing young children. In order to further improve the quality of the recordings, I borrowed my teenage son's four-track tape recorder. This wonderful piece of equipment would allow me to record each voice (i.e. a child's and my own) independently on the same tape. So, if a child's voice was particularly quiet, then I could increase the volume of the recording without increasing the volume of my own voice. I practised using the technique with some friends' children before taking the apparatus along to the first nursery class.

When considering my interview schedule, I knew the interview would have to be of short duration since such young children might not want to maintain a long conversation. I also had to keep questions to a minimum, wanting the interviews to progress more as open conversations than interrogations. By telling the children that I did not know much about their own nursery experience (which I did not), I hoped to put the children into the role of 'expert' and hence reduce my power still further.

There were more ethical considerations to be taken into account in the development of the technique. In no way did I want to 'trick' the children into making comments which would be tape recorded. I would, therefore, make the children fully aware of the presence of the tape recorder, and give them the opportunity to listen to the recordings after

the interviews. Once I had used the technique in two nursery classes in the final phase, I submitted a paper for publication (Evans and Fuller, 1996).

Meeting Marton: Phenomenography as a research approach

The suggestion that information obtained through interviewing young children may not be worthwhile or reliable (Dunn and Morgan, 1987; Lewis, 1992) caused me to consider *phenomenography* (Marton, 1981, 1988a, 1988b) as a research approach in an attempt to reduce these problems.

Phenomenography was developed in order to explore students' understanding and experience of specific phenomena and has principally been used in the field of science education (e.g. Renstrom et al., 1990), and so, comparing my baggage with Marton's, a link is formed with my own background in education. Like the ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1992) adopted as the major guiding theoretical framework for my research, phenomenography focuses on experience (Marton, 1981). However, whilst an ecological perspective requires a contextually bound research model, phenomenography, as a research approach, decontextualises resulting data.

Phenomenography is based on the notion that there are a *limited* number of:

> ...*qualitatively different ways* [my emphasis] in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive and

> understand various aspects of, and phenomena in the world around them (Marton, 1988a, p.178-9).

The qualitatively different ways in which people perceive a phenomenon are termed *'categories of description'* (Marton, 1988a, p.181). These 'categories of description' are the most distinctive feature of phenomenography and are considered the main outcome, or results. Hence, phenomenography attempts to *characterise* the way in which aspects of the world are perceived by people (Marton, 1988a). In adopting a phenomenographic approach in investigating children's perceptions of an aspect of their education, I would be considering the *qualitatively different ways* in which that phenomenon is perceived or is understood by children; thus children's perceptions might be *characterised.*

Implications for data gathering

The principal method of data collection adopted in phenomenography is the interview, although Marton (1988b) indicates that on a few occasions other means have been used such as the analysis of children's drawings. Marton (1981, 1988a, 1988b) provides little information relating to interview approaches, stressing that 'This is because we prefer to standardise the type of outcome instead of the procedure' (1988a, p.197). However, Marton (1988b) does suggest that interview questions should be as open-ended as possible, so that respondents are free to answer in the way they choose under minimum control of the interviewer.

Questions should only form a framework for responses as 'different interviews may follow different courses' (p.197). Whilst the data gathering procedure can be considered similar to that used in phenomenological models of research, phenomenography differs in that its results are categories of description.

I considered such semi-structured interviewing procedures appropriate for gaining information from children as young as those in my study. Asking the children many closed questions might merely cause them to reply in the affirmative, instead of offering their own perceptions of their nursery education.

Phenomenographic analysis

Interviews are transcribed before analysis. The categories of description are arrived at inductively from the raw data themselves, not made up in advance as in content analysis. Quotes from interview data are selected and brought together in groups according to similarities. These quotes form a 'data pool' (Marton, 1988b, p.155) which is used for the next stage of the analysis. These decontextualised quotes are then examined for their meanings and rearranged and regrouped in an iterative procedure until a category develops. The meaning of the category evolves as a result of bringing quotes together, and as the categories emerge, so it can be decided which quotes can be included into which category. In this way perceptions of phenomena are *mapped*, hence the name of the approach, phenomeno*graphy*. The resulting *categories of description* are

objective conceptions of thought, separating thought from thinker (Marton, 1988a). Since these objective conceptions are removed from their original context, they might be applied across different contexts (Marton, 1988a).

Sometimes categories of description are organised into a hierarchy, in such a way that relations between different understandings of specific phenomena might be explored. Marton (1988a, p.178), illustrates this procedure using the five qualitatively different ways 13 to 16-year-olds account for the act of seeing objects, as follows:-

1. The link between the eyes and the object is taken for granted - 'you can simply see'.
2. There is a picture going from the object to the eyes. When it reaches the eyes, we see.
3. There are beams coming out of the eyes. When they hit the object, we see.
4. There are beams going back and forth between the eyes and the object. The eyes send out beams that hit the object, return, and tell the eyes about it.
5. The object reflects light, and when it hits the eyes, we can see the object.

In this way the qualitatively different ways in which the students perceive the phenomenon of sight are ordered from the least correct (1) to correct (5).

Sherman and Webb (1988) maintain that phenomenography is similar to grounded theory in its aim. Although not used in the cyclical pattern adopted in grounded theory, the categories of description are derived inductively from the raw data. I am also aware of similarities between phenomenographic analysis and sequential analysis and pattern

coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Marton (1988a) maintains that phenomenographic analysis does resemble other techniques, but that it should be considered as an approach in its own right, the distinguishing feature being the development and use of the categories of description as results.

Implications of adopting phenomenography for my research

As I mentioned above, I hoped to adopt a phenomenographic approach in that part of my research involving young children in order to *characterise* their perceptions of their nursery class. Therefore, I would be considering the *qualitatively different ways* in which young children perceive, or understand, aspects of their nursery class experience. Interview 'questions' would be open-ended. Since I aimed to characterise perceptions, I needed to interview as large a sample of children as possible in each nursery class selected for study. This imperative was taken into consideration in the development of the interviewing technique.

Am I travelling in the 'correct' manner?: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Whilst I have discussed some concerns regarding the ethical problems involved in interviewing children, I now want to consider such issues in my research as a whole.

Informed consent

Robson (1993) points out that ethical problems are present from the outset of a study. Selecting particular topics for investigation and choosing locations, are considerations which in themselves raise moral questions. Linked with these factors is the issue of the *informed consent* (Burgess, 1989a; Punch, 1994) of those taking part in the research.

In the three phases of my research, these concerns were dealt with in different ways. Nursery classes for the preliminary study were selected at random, there being no criteria for selection at that point in my research. Letters sent to schools outlined my project, and in follow-up telephone calls, I was able to discuss the study in greater depth and answer any questions. Two headteachers of the four approached agreed to allow me to conduct the research, the nursery teachers being consulted by the headteachers beforehand. Once in the settings, I discussed the research with the nursery teachers and nursery nurses, and involved them as collaborators, taking up their suggestions as to what I might observe. I therefore feel satisfied that the criterion of informed consent was fulfilled.

Choosing a venue was not a consideration for the survey, since I wanted to visit as many nursery classes as could be accessed. Access was achieved through the same means as for the preliminary study (letters followed by telephone calls). However, I felt an uncomfortable concern for the feelings of some nursery teachers who had not been consulted by their headteachers, and had merely been *told* that a researcher was

coming. Therefore, informed consent had not been achieved with some participants in some settings. As mentioned earlier, when considering research with children, Kimmel (1988) points out that it is unethical to coerce relatively powerless individuals to take part in research. Given the power relationship which may exist between a headteacher and a member of staff, some coercion (even though unintentional) may have indeed taken place, and is an issue which warrants consideration in research conducted in schools.

During the access process for the third phase, I sent information relating to the research to the schools prior to my first visit for the phase. The research was further discussed with both the headteachers and the nursery teachers during this first visit, and they were given the option to withdraw. However, again I made assumptions about consultation with other members of staff (i.e. the nursery nurses) and, although they seemed very willing to take part in the research, they may have been coerced into doing so, although I don't know that this was the case.

Since I wanted to explore perceptions in settings which had different characteristics, there were certain criteria I used in selection, one being the degree of openness to parents. Whilst I volunteered details of observations of activities and interviews I wanted to conduct, allowing staff to look at the interview schedule for parents, I did not disclose that the class had been selected because of its degree of openness to parents. This basis for selection may not have been a problem at Harrington or

Catsbury, but staff at Fiddlebrooke, which was closed to parents, may not have been happy to be judged in this way. I found myself in a moral dilemma regarding how much to reveal. In the event, during the research the nursery teacher at Fiddlebrooke openly discussed the lack of openness to parents.

Style of teaching and learning, another criterion for selection, was not discussed either. Since I was seeking participant perceptions of nursery education, I felt any discussion on this issue might cause staff to make certain responses during interviews. I pondered over these issues and was concerned that by not giving this information I was deceiving my participants. Punch (1994, p.90) indicates that 'some argue that it is perfectly legitimate to expose nefarious institutions by using a measure of deceit'. Whilst not condoning such a stance, Punch does accept what he terms 'some moderate measure of field-related deception' (p.92), provided this does not harm participants. I certainly did not feel that I was harming my participants, and had to consider the ethics of *not* revealing information which might be considered to have implications for future practice.

Regarding the informed consent of the parents who took part in my study, all parents were sent a letter giving details of the research. Those who were approached to take part were given more details of what would happen during the interviews, either by myself or the nursery

teacher. At the start of the interviews I explained the research again, and gave parents the opportunity to withdraw.

I have discussed power relations in the section on interviewing. Whilst aiming to make parents feel comfortable and relaxed in a facilitating environment, revealing some details about myself in order to be accepted by the groups, was I perhaps encouraging them to talk freely about issues which they might have not revealed in a more formal interview? Such a situation might be thought to be manipulative (Riddell, 1989). However, I considered that I was empowering my participants to give their opinions, allowing their voices to be heard.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Smith (1990) contends 'The two most important principles for the protection of human subjects are informed consent and anonymity' (p.260). Having discussed the former issue, I will now deal with the latter, together with the problem of confidentiality, whilst recognising that 'privacy, anonymity and confidentiality are virtually impossible in qualitative case studies that are of high fidelity' (Lincoln, 1990, p.279).

I assured all participants (except the children) that any information collected during the research would remain confidential. Telling the children that I would not inform their teachers what they said would have been inappropriate. Such a stance would have encouraged secrecy, and also perhaps undermined the teachers'authority. However, I did not feel I could just collect information and 'run away' from the setting. Hence, I

promised staff that I would return data collected from parent and child interviews. Parents were told at the outset of their interviews that their comments would be passed back to the staff, but that they would remain anonymous, neither names nor dates of interviews being given. I realised that such a situation might affect parent responses, but felt the need to be 'up front' with staff about the data I had collected.

On the issue of anonymity Punch (1994, p.92) suggests:

> there is a strong feeling among field workers that settings and respondents should not be identifiable in print.

Whilst the nursery classes in the preliminary study and the survey may not be identifiable, I have described the settings I visited in the third phase in some detail (see Chapter Four) in an attempt to provide rich description as a context in which perceptions had developed, or were developing. Although pseudonyms have been adopted, I have wrestled with the possibility that schools may be identified. Settings are often chosen because they are conveniently located in close proximity to research institutions, and hence might easily be identified (Punch, 1994). The nursery classes in my research were situated some distance from the institution, and so anonymity might thus be achieved. But the possibility of identification as a result of my descriptions still lingers.

Section Two

Making 'Sense' of Data

Introduction

And so I arrive at the second section. It was during this part of my research, the analysis of interviews and field notes, and the writing of the thesis, that many changes took place in my thinking. Therefore I have devoted this separate section to analysis and writing, for these represent a major milestone in my journey.

Beginning another change of course - ANALYSIS

Making sense of interview transcripts

Having transcribed all the interviews, the feat of analysing them lay before me. The task seemed immense, and when a female colleague commented that what she liked about qualitative research was "the sort of mess of data from which you can tease out information", I began to feel that this was definitely not for me. My research origins lay in the scientific, positivist paradigm and, perhaps as a result, I preferred to have my data tightly organised in tables, histograms etc. I felt that I would get myself into a terrible muddle if I had to keep sifting through interview transcripts.

With great relief on my part, another colleague introduced me to computer data analysis in the form of the NUD.IST (QSR, 1995)

program. This discovery was the answer to my problems. My colleague gave me an introduction to the program using the demonstration disk, but although this introduced me to some of the principles, I knew that I would need to sit down and learn how to use it, step by step, with the manual; a challenge lay before me!

Making friends with NUD.IST: working towards a brain upgrade.

Basic principles

NUD.IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data. Indexing, Searching, Theorising) can be used not only as a code-and-retrieve data handling device, but also to develop and store concepts, the interrelationships of which can be explored (Richards and Richards, 1994).

During the initial analysis procedure, textual data and ideas/concepts/theories are organised hierarchically in a category *tree*, which appears in a window on screen as it is built up (see Appendix A5 for two trees developed for this study; the larger tree was created for the whole study, whilst the smaller, simpler tree was created using data from child interviews and used for demonstration at a conference).

Portions of text (text units) and ideas/concepts are indexed at *nodes* on the tree as it is created. Whole documents may also be indexed at nodes. Each node is given a name and, according to its position on the tree, a *node address*. A second window on screen shows a selected part of a branch of the category tree, with its nodes and node names (see Appendix A5 for examples). Some nodes might not contain text units, but act as *parent nodes* to groups of sub-nodes (*child nodes*); for

example, a parent node named 'gender', would bear two child nodes named 'male' and 'female'. As the tree develops, so ideas, hypotheses etc. can be explored through interrogation of the index system. Memos can be written as ideas develop, and stored at nodes.

Getting down to it

As I worked with the program, I stopped at various stages and wrote about what I had done. This procedure not only provided me with a record of my actions, but also, through the act of writing, served to improve my understanding of the program.

Documents containing interview data and descriptions of the nursery classes, first had to be adjusted so that they were suitable for importing into NUD.IST. A 'header' followed by two returns had to be placed at the beginning of each document. I also needed to produce subsections in the text, using an asterisk (*) to denote their beginning; I decided that each subsection would begin with my questions. Names of interviewees (pseudonyms) were altered so that they were written in full or abbreviated form (I had used initials during transcription). I decided to place names of interviewees on the first line of each text unit, followed by a colon. In this way, each text unit's speaker could be identified without the need to set up separate nodes within the base data branch of the category tree. Also, specific speakers could be searched for in the text by entering the name, followed by a colon (for example, everything which Janet said within her focus group could be accessed by searching for

'Janet:'). Text units were temporarily set at the length of speaker turns in interviews. All documents were saved as **text files** within Microsoft Word, ready for importation into the program.

Indexing base data

Once all the interview documents and descriptions of nursery classes had been imported into the program, I decided to concentrate on constructing a branch on my category tree for all *base data.* The base data branch would contain nodes for all the variables which might be needed in interrogations, and which would also help to identify text units (for example, parents, gender, social class, schools etc.) I therefore started by creating a node (1) for all base data. Four 'child' nodes were first created from the base data (1) node; these nodes were as follows:-

node address	name
(1 1)	parents
(1 2)	staff
(1 3)	children
(1 4)	schools

Whole documents were indexed at these nodes, with the exception of node (1 4) which was to act as a parent node for the data from the three different schools.

node (1 1) indexed all interviews with parents.
node (1 2) indexed all interviews with staff.
node (1 3) indexed all interviews with children.
node (1 4) a 'parent' node (empty).

Further details of how the base data branch of the category tree was constructed have been placed in Appendix A5.

All base data were then summarised in a print-out. I felt that spending time organising base data was worthwhile for I had now worked with the data in the program, become really familiar with it and was aware of many of the base variable categories which might be explored. Also, cross referencing after searches meant that information relating to each text unit would be available i.e. each text unit would bear information on variables such as the school with which the speaker was associated, social class, marital status etc.

Considering participant perceptions and opinions

I next had to consider categories emerging from the responses in the interviews which related to participant perceptions and opinions. I firstly created 5 major *'parent'* nodes which would contain data associated with my questions for parents, as shown in the Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1

Major 'parent' nodes created for parent data in NUD.IST

node address	name	definition
(2)	purpose/aims	'parent' node for perceptions of the purpose and aims of nursery education
(3)	quality	'parent' node for perceptions of quality
(4)	pre-school	'parent' node for opinions on other forms of pre-school
(5)	vouchers	'parent' node for opinions on vouchers
(6)	working	a node on which results of interrogations could temporarily be placed for inspection

At this point in the analysis, I ceased working on the current tree, and set up a separate project in the program in order to analyse the transcripts of interviews with children. As I wanted to write a conference paper on children's perceptions of their nursery education (subsequently accepted

for publication - Evans and Fuller (in press a)), I needed to experiment with the application of *phenomenographic analysis* within NUD.IST.

Phenomenographic analysis within NUD.IST.

Responses made by the children fell within the following three major areas relating to the 'questions' posed in the interviews:-

- why they thought they attended nursery class;
- what they liked about their nursery class;
- what they disliked about their nursery class.

Within NUD.IST these responses were indexed in three *parent* nodes entitled 'why', 'likes' and 'dislikes'. A print-out of the responses in each *parent* node was then obtained. Firstly working with the 'why' node print-out, responses were grouped according to similarities and indexed in *child* nodes within the program which were given temporary names. Once all the data relating to children's perceptions of why they attend nursery class had been indexed in *child* nodes, print-outs of the responses in each were obtained. The 'pool of meanings' (Marton, 1988b, p.155) emerging from each child node was then examined, and each group compared. Back in the program, responses were moved and sorted again until seven *child* nodes had been created representing the *categories of description* for children's perceptions of *why* they attend nursery class.

Next the print-out for the *parent* node entitled 'likes' was examined and the same procedure followed as was used for the 'why'

major category. This time five *categories of description* emerged relating to what children *liked* about their nursery class. The process was repeated for the major category entitled 'dislikes', with five *categories of description* emerging which related to what children *disliked* about their nursery class. Each group of categories of description was organised in a hierarchy (see Chapter Seven).

Analysing parent and staff perceptions

I had originally adopted phenomenography as an approach which would enable the characterisation of young children's perceptions, but decided to apply phenomenographic analysis to parent interview transcripts as well. Since I had used open-ended questions in interviews, and responses were fairly unstructured, phenomenographic analysis formed a useful tool for systematising the data. I proceeded in the same way as for the children's interviews, starting with parents' perceptions of the purposes of nursery education. However, I used only the transcripts for the three focus groups at Harrington in order to establish the categories of description, since using all the transcripts made the procedure unwieldy. Using the standard indexing procedure, text units from interview transcripts from Catsbury and Fiddlebrooke were then indexed at the nodes created for each category of description, there being no new categories of description emerging. Therefore, I created *child* nodes for each of these sub-categories.

Staff transcripts were analysed using the nodes set up for the categories of description for parent perceptions, text units being indexed at these prepared nodes.

Interrogating the index system: basic principles

Once sufficient data have been indexed, interrogations of the index system can be conducted. The results of any interrogations or searches are placed on the node clipboard and can then be moved to a 'working' node for inspection. Retrieved text units can be spread by any number of text units on each side, so that they can be examined in context. Results of interrogations and searches can be merged into existing nodes, indexed at new nodes, or simply taken as a hard copy on a print-out and then deleted.

Several different types of searches can be conducted within NUD.IST, but I found the *intersection* and *matrix* most useful for my project. An account of how I conducted some of these interrogations has been placed in Appendix A5. As searches were conducted, so new ideas and hypotheses could be tested and further explored. I counted text units relating to the various categories of description, expressing the total as percentages and constructing bar graphs (these appear intermingled with the text in the relevant chapters).

At this point, I wanted to express parent responses within the various categories of description in graphical form in order that *patterns* might be revealed within the data. However, counting *respondents*

making responses within those categories, would not be feasible due to the small numbers of parents interviewed within each school. Any retrieval within NUD.IST offers a statistical measure (expressed as a percentage) of the extent to which text unit finds are represented in the document i.e. the percentage of text units in the document which refer to the search conducted. However, I wanted to explore the extent to which group discussions focused on particular areas in response to certain questions and express these foci in a form which would be easily accessible. In other words, I wanted to represent the *"flavour"* of parts of the focus group discussions in graphical form. Using print-outs from NUD.IST which related to responses within the different categories of description, I calculated the number of *text units* retrieved in each category as a percentage of the total number of text units from all categories. I then repeated this process for the other settings.

Reflections on NUD.IST

At the time of writing, the category tree in my main project bears 114 nodes, most of which represent variables which can be compared, differentiated and explored. I say 'at the time of writing' because I could go on interrogating and building my category tree some time in the future, revisiting my data with new questions and ideas.

I could have written an account entitled 'My Love Affair With NUD.IST', but it might well have turned into something deemed unsuitable for a thesis. The program took away my anxieties regarding

handling so much 'messy' data, and removed my concerns about the possibility of boredom associated with repeatedly sorting through transcripts. Some of my fellow research students have expressed the view that the program makes the analysis too rigid and compartmentalised, but I have to disagree. The fact that so many variables can be considered in the analysis means that both similarities *and* differences in the data are exemplified. Just one text unit might occupy a node, and can still be included in a search, demonstrating the power of the program to include analysis at the level of the individual. I was pleased to read Richards and Richards (1994, p.458) description of NUD.IST as being 'software that seems designed to *celebrate diversity*' [my emphasis], for it accorded with my own experience.

But I have spoken only of what might be considered the first phase of the analysis. Dey (1993) maintains that using computer data analysis in qualitative research takes so much of the labour out of data handling that the researcher has more time to *think creatively*. The speed and ease with which data could be sorted and retrieved certainly impacted on the next stage of my research - the writing. Moving from text to NUD.IST and back as I wrote, ideas could be explored quickly. I had achieved a brain upgrade.

But I have yet to discuss the analysis of my observations. Analysis of this data, and further analysis of interview material, became so

tightly interwoven with the writing process, that they will be considered together.

Entering warm pastures and dipping my toes in the postmodernist stream: THE WRITING PHASE.

And so I reach the end, no the start, no a phase in my journey. As I said at the outset, what I started to do transformed into something rather different. By virtue of my own development during the process of the research, I cannot see how such an outcome could be changed. But it was during this part of the research, the writing phase, that the most significant changes in my thinking occurred. And this is why I have included a section on writing in this chapter.

Writing as method: method as writing

Throughout my study writing has occupied much of my time. The writing has been for different purposes and in different forms: field notes, initial writing up of the research process, papers for presentation and for publication, my reflexive journal to list but a few. The act of writing, for me, helps me to think. I think to write; I write to think. Putting words on paper provides me with a visual means for ordering my concepts. My journal became known to me as my 'think book' as I jotted down ideas and thoughts whilst on my journey.

Commenting in 1986, Clifford points out that the issue of writing in social sciences was only just starting to be seriously discussed, and contends that this 'reflects the persistence of an ideology claiming

transparency of representation' (1986, p.2). And yet, as Atkinson (1991) asserts, the writing up of qualitative research is, out of necessity, a lengthy process, and warrants substantial consideration. Richardson (1994) airs her discontent with much qualitative writing, admitting she has 'yawned' (p.516) her way through many qualitative studies. She points out that 'Unlike quantitative work, which can carry its meaning in its tables and summaries, qualitative work depends on people's *reading* [my emphasis] it' (p.517). Further, she maintains, like me, that writing is a part of methodology itself, and that through writing the writer goes through a process of discovery. Manen (1990, p.11) also foregrounds writing as method, claiming that 'human science *is* [original emphasis] a form of writing', and indicates the dearth of literature relating to writing as part of the research process.

For me the iterative process of interacting with data, writing and reading strangely both orders thoughts, yet also puts them into a state of flux. And it is this process which, for me, justifies writing as a methodological tool.

My focus on writing grew out of a 'crisis' in my research. I had my own 'crisis of representation' (Dickens and Fontana, 1994a, p.6), a crisis shared with those who have adopted a 'postmodern sensibility' (Richardson, 1991, p.178) towards the research process and writing.

My own 'crisis of representation': *a temporal shift*

I am sitting at my desk listening to a tape recording of one of my focus group interviews with three mothers, slowly typing the words, transcribing what I hear on my word processor. I have to listen to small sections of speech over and over again to make sure

I don't 'misrepresent' my participants. The sounds conjure up memories of the moment. I am back there with the group, listening to them, watching them. I remember my feelings of wanting to empower these women, my feelings of empathy for their sense of failure in their own education and their wanting to achieve better for their own children. The mood changes. I laugh with them. We laugh a lot. We listen to stories each has to tell. We laugh again. I feel bolstered up by the experience. Listening to the recording is like listening to a play, but unlike it in that I am part of it - physically there and emotionally intertwined with it. And I feel my involvement with these people now, as I write.

It was some months before I returned to my tape recordings and transcripts. The task of writing these people's voices lay before me. I listened to the tape recordings, I read the transcripts, I perused computer print outs and suddenly representing these voices as a text proved problematic. For I saw the transcript as a text in itself which I wanted to offer to the reader as a whole. But in trying to 'represent' these voices, I became increasingly aware of an internal battle - a battle between two 'mes', 'Scientist Me' and 'Dramatist Me'.

'Scientist Me' seeks to distance herself from the research and wants the data to be manageable, controlled, compact, organised. Issues of objectivity, validity and generalisability continually raise questions - Am I offering a biased account? Have I asked questions in such a way that I might have influenced participant responses? Is my sample large enough, and do I have enough data, to be able to suggest relationships and make inferences? 'Scientist Me' categorises, classifies and counts; she separates thoughts from thinkers, and combines these abstracted conceptions to illustrate 'universal patterns'. Having indulged in such practices, she is satisfied that her data are 'under control', but worries whether she has enough data or if she should employ such methods with such a 'small' sample.

The other me - Dramatist Me - has been wrestling with Scientist Me, who until recently was the more prominent of the two. However, Dramatist Me has now taken up shared occupation of Scientist Me's territory and the two are cohabiting, albeit a stormy relationship. Dramatist Me, far from distancing herself, sees herself as interwoven with the research process, unable to escape from her own humanness in her human interactions with the participants and her human interpretation of their utterances and behaviour. Had she been interacting with mice, as she did when doing research in the sixties, then distancing would be feasible; after all she has never been a mouse (although perhaps she has metaphorically) and, therefore, would bring no ready-made 'mouse schemata' into the research! But she now realises that human/human research may not be equated with human/other-species research. She has to acknowledge her

own 'baggage' (Scheurich, 1995) and the influence such baggage might have on methodology and interpretations.

Dramatist Me perceives the importance of each focus group interview as being a 'lived-at-that-moment' experience in itself, an event at a particular time and, therefore, a piece of history - a snapshot. She repeatedly relives each of these events as if she were replaying a video recording, reminding herself of the setting, and of the participants, their appearance, their body language and their interactions with each other and with her. Having used computer analysis techniques, she is now aware that her participants in nine focus groups offered over 4000 utterances, each utterance being a valuable piece of information, made with a particular inflection and mannerism, made within a group of other utterances from other participants and made by participants whose own previous experiences and personalities may have impacted on the discussion. How can all this 'colour' be captured in print? Dramatist Me wants to be able bring each 'event' alive, to offer each 'event' as if it were a script for a play. Suddenly the 'data' have mushroomed. Now she has too much data!

Such was my lived experience. For me this was an epiphany (Denzin, 1989, 1992) in my research, an event in which I was tightly interwoven. My overwhelming feelings were those of *doubt*; *doubt* about my research methods, *doubt* about my analysis and *doubt* that I could represent the voices of my participants in any other way than the text of the transcript, which in itself was inadequate for it was lacking in 'all the juice of the lived experience' (Scheurich, 1995, p.24). I also began to question how I could represent, in textual form, the settings I had visited. Having adopted ecological systems theory in order to structure my research, I had doubts about whether I should have used such a framework. I wrote in my journal:

Why do I have to use a theory? These theories have been conjured up by those who have not been there (in my research). By virtue of the fact that these theorists (usually men) have spent a long time in the academic world, why should so much importance be attached to what they say?

18/10/96 (I acknowledge that Rhedding-Jones (1997) also used journal entries in her thesis, although I did not discover this until *after* drafting this chapter.)

It was this doubt which led me towards the postmodernists' domain. As Richardson (1994) explains:

> The core of postmodernism is the *doubt* [original emphasis] that any method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the 'right' or the privileged form of authoritative knowledge (p. 517).

These notions led me to consider issues of voice and authorship.

Putting myself 'into the text': using the 'I' word and issues of voice

It was during my Master's course that my pedagogue instilled in me the notion that 'Thou shalt not use the 'I' word' when writing up research. Using the passive voice was congruent with my scientific background, and I accepted that this was *the* way to write. But at the start of my current project, my mentor encouraged me to write using an active voice - I could use the 'I' word. I proceeded to write in the first person. However, whilst using the 'I' word I was not in the text. Awareness of my own subjectivity eluded me, feeling as if I were a pollutant in the text.

Bruner (1986) maintains that there are two modes of thought, the 'paradigmatic or logico-scientific mode' (p.12) and the 'narrative mode' (p.13). The two types of thinking differ in that the narrative mode 'strives to put its timeless miracles into the particulars of experience' (p.13), whilst the paradigmatic or logico-scientific mode works towards abstraction. Bruner (1986) points out that the type of thinking employed by the novelist or poet when writing is very different from that of the scientist in compiling a report.

The paradigmatic mode of thinking has dominated the social sciences (Sparkes, 1995). Referring to ethnography, Tyler (1986) asserts:

> The urge to conform to the canons of scientific rhetoric has made the easy realism of natural history the dominant mode of ethnographic prose (p.130).

In such writing the author is 'absent' or resides in the text as 'the researcher' in order to maintain an objective stance and hence not contaminate the research. An omniscient researcher presides over the text, one who is neutral, value-free and emotionally disengaged. Such was the cloak of pretence I wore as a positivist. But as Beach (1994) points out:

> In trying to appear 'scientific' and 'objective', the ethnographer has weakened the possibilities his or her work has for helping readers to see, 'hear' and 'feel' the lived experiences of his research subjects (p.3).

Some postmodernists delete the author's voice through the production of a collaboratively produced text in order to empower participants (Richardson, 1991). For example, Tyler (1986) argues in favour of the production of a text in which 'none of whose participants would have the final word' (p.127). Whilst I wanted to achieve what Tyler terms 'perspectival relativity' (p.127) by allowing the voices of my participants to be heard, a collaborative text of the sort he advocates, would not have been feasible for my study. Time limitations and the fact that the children taking part in the study were not literate, ruled out such procedures. Besides, the topic 'Perceptions of Nursery Education' is not one which

might evoke an emotional commitment to the production of such a text. However, emotionally charged issues were raised by participants in the study which could be the subject of further research involving the production of a collaborative text.

There are those who, whilst adopting a postmodern sensibility, also bear allegiance to a feminist disposition (e.g. Richardson, 1991; Packwood and Sikes, 1996) and consider the importance of positioning the researcher in the text. As Packwood and Sikes (1996) assert:

> ...one of the voices to be heard in the polyphonic chorus is that of the researcher. That voice tells not merely the single story of the research process but also those of the emotional investment in the work and the motivation behind it (p.342).

So my awareness of my own subjectivity guiding my research and writing had been evoked through my interaction with my participants' voices and through my problems of representing those voices. But this evocation brought to consciousness not only two voices, that of the scientist (the paradigmatic thinker) and that of the dramatist (the narrative thinker), but also my voices as a mother, a teacher, a researcher and that imbued by my working-class background. And so my authorial voice is a 'blend of many voices' (Ronai, 1992, p.102), and these many voices guide the production of the text.

Having established that I could write myself into my research, the issue of writing my participants' voices remained, for I was aiming to produce a text which, as Tyler describes so powerfully for me, could be:

> ...read not only with the eyes alone, but with the ears in order to hear [quoting St. Bernard] 'the voices of the pages' (1986, p.136).

Back and forth between science and literature

So I could write my 'self' into the text, but the issue of representation still lingered. 'Dramatist Me', my narrative mode, wanted, nay needed, to write a play as a means of representing the voices of my participants and the lived experience of the research process. With some surprise, relief and comfort I read of those academics who had chosen to represent their lived experience as *drama* (Richardson and Lockeridge, 1991; Ellis and Bochner, 1992) and the voice of a research participant as *poetry* (Richardson, 1992a).

Clifford (1986) discusses the intertwining of academic and literary genres in ethnography which have 'blurred the boundary separating art and science' (p.3), and suggests that writing should be experimental. Experimental writing is also espoused by Richardson (1994), who maintains that it provides a way of 'knowing'. She legitimates her contention from a postmodernist perspective, asserting:

> ...writing is always partial, local and situational, and our Self is always present, no matter how much we try to suppress it - but only partially present, for in our writing we repress parts of ourselves too. Working from that premise, we are freed to write material in a variety of ways: to tell and retell. There is no such thing as 'getting it right', only 'getting it' differently contained and nuanced (p.521).

However, Packwood and Sikes (1996) warn of the situation in which experimentation and 'stylistic attempts to represent voice' (p.338) can become of greater import than the reality of the text. For me the issue was not a desire to experiment with the text; it was a personal need to represent the voices of my participants and my lived experience of the research in forms which seemed so obviously appropriate - those employing the rhetorical devices of literature.

Voice and experience: reporting, representing, evoking?

I have not fully resolved the problem of representing parents' voices in their focus groups, since the writing of nine one-act plays was neither practical nor plausible. However, several ideas have come to mind whilst writing this thesis which I hope to take up in the future, perhaps for a journal article. One, for example, would be to write a play using composite characters who represent different groups, such as 'the single mother'. Whilst presenting much of my data from the focus groups in a standard social scientific format, using categories and themes developed through phenomenographic analysis in NUD.IST, I tried to foreground voice. I have interspersed the text with 'scenes' from the 'events' in an attempt to emphasise and illustrate the dialogic and discursive character of focus group interactions, and also position myself in the research.

Interestingly, I felt no need to represent the voices of the staff in any way other than what might be considered 'standard' social scientific

writing. Why was this? The interpretive process was somewhat difficult and arduous; I admit to finding it boring. I wrote in my journal:

Why do I find what they [the staff] *are saying so difficult to interpret? Is it because I am so close to the situation as a teacher myself?* 3/12/96

Perhaps I was too close as a professional. In talking to staff there was a professional relationship. Although the nursery teachers and I talked as 'friends', we were talking about teaching. Hence, as a result of my professional stance, I may have emotionally disengaged myself from the text. Tyler (1986, p.130) talks of 'evoking' rather than 'representing', thus freeing the text from 'the inappropriate mode of the scientific rhetoric'. And perhaps the *emotional engagement* with some parts of my research has effected a desire to produce an *evocative text*, a desire to bring forth in the reader some of the emotions of the event, and also to *empower* the reader so that s/he might be allowed to engage in her/his own interpretation without my own 'didactic analysis' (Barone, 1995, p.67). Hence, I have added short descriptions of the most salient events in my lived experience of the research process involving staff - the interviews with the headteachers.

I move on to the children. Having used phenomenography as a research approach to *characterise* children's perceptions, I then represented the *data* (not their voices) as categories of description, expressing numbers of responses in the form of bar graphs. I was

reporting my findings. And yet I was satisfied with that form. Why? I felt an emotional engagement with this part of the research as a mother, but also a professional distance existed as a teacher. The children's utterances were short compared with those of the adults, and therefore interpretation was simplistic, akin to that which is required for questionnaire responses. But perhaps the difference was to do with 'baggage'. At four years of age these little people have not had sufficient time to amass the experiences, memories and beliefs which have been accumulated by adults. Whereas the parents' 'baggage' may consist of several suitcases, the children may only have a lunch box. And although this lunch box may appear the same each day on the outside, the contents may be continually changing - today it's orange juice and cheese sandwiches, tomorrow it might be apple juice and a ham roll. Such is the rapid development occurring in such young children and the changing and situated nature of their perceptions.

However, when I came to bring voices of staff, parents and children together in order to 'crystallise' the research (Richardson, 1994), there was again a problem of representation. Should I simply report on what had been said by the different groups, making my analytical comparisons and excluding voices? Having almost obliterated the voices of the children in Chapter Seven, I now felt the need to let their voices be heard alongside those of the parents and staff. Again, *emotional involvement* caused me to write *evocatively*. Inspired by Richardson

(1992a), I turned to poetry as a means of communicating voice. Using the words of my participants, I constructed a chorus of voices which, whilst I have made deliberate attempts to convey meaning, the reader can interpret for her/himself.

Following the poems, genre changes again, and I offer *my* interpretation in an analytical format. I bring in other 'voices' by referring to the literature, notably that of Bronfenbrenner, and also situate participant voices in context through reference to my observations.

'Being' in context.

Besides issues of voice, I encountered problems with the textual representation of the nursery class settings. Perceptions were to be situated in context, and that context had to be made available to the reader. Again the issue of emotional involvement with my research came into play. I wanted to take the reader back to the nursery classes I had visited, and experience my experience vicariously. I could have represented the 'facts' in tabular form, as I did for a journal article. But I wanted to depict life in each nursery class. I again called upon literature for a rhetorical device - that of narrative.

Polkinghorne (1995) points out that in qualitative research the term narrative has different meanings. I use 'narrative' to mean 'story' in that I tell of my experience of visiting the nursery classes and what happened when I was there. Having visited the nursery classes seven times, including the survey visit, I decided to write what I term a

composite narrative, using information from all the visits to write a narrative as if it were my *first visit* to the classroom. Interestingly, some nine months after having the idea to write my account as a first visit, I found that Wolcott (1994) had used a similar technique, terming this a 'day-in-the-life' (p.19) account. Using my field notes taken during general observations, I selected events/instances which would illustrate certain phenomena such as management of behaviour, curriculum, style of teaching and learning, carpet sessions, interactions between staff and parents etc. And so, using these events, I constructed a story, the 'particularities of the story' being, as Bruner (1986) describes Joyce's thoughts, 'the epiphanies of the ordinary' (p.13). My focused observations provided me with information for writing richly descriptive vignettes. As I explain in Chapter Four, these vignettes are written in the present tense, and offered as if 'video clips', each with its own title, and are placed in the text at appropriate moments in the story. Some have been embellished with representative events observed at other times in the nursery class. In my use of such 'thick description' (Denzin, 1989, p.83) I hope to *evoke* feelings in the reader in an attempt to enable her/him to engage vicariously in my experience.

Interestingly, in writing Chapter Three (The Macrosystem), I distanced myself. Although I was 'present' in the survey, there was little emotional involvement. Why? Perhaps it was because I visited so many nursery classes, and for only one session, there was no time to get

'involved'. Also, some of the data could be quantified. So I *report* what occurred during the survey, relying quite heavily on the 'paradigmatic mode'. However, I have included vignettes in the text which illustrate my 'lived experience' (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992a, p.6) of the research process.

The writing of this methodological chapter proved particularly problematic. How could I show the change in my thinking and development over time? Several writers point out that most researchers fail to include their personal experience of the research process when writing up their accounts (Van Maanen, 1988; Atkinson, 1990; Walford, 1991; Punch, 1994). These accounts are often written after the main research report, or, if they do appear at all, are placed in the appendix. As Punch indicates:

> ...often we are left in the dark as to the personal and intellectual path that led researchers to drop one line of the inquiry or to pursue another topic (1994, p.86).

The personal narrative account can help to authenticate the research (Atkinson, 1990). Van Maanen (1988) refers to this type of account as the 'confessional tale' in which 'there is an intimacy to be established with readers, a personal character to develop, trials to portray' (p.75).

I decided to portray my methodological overview in allegorical form - as a reflexive journey on which I travel, checking my 'baggage' as I go, coming up against problems and making decisions. In this way the developmental and dynamic nature of the research process and my thinking might thus be illustrated.

My autobiography, which declares my baggage at the beginning of this chapter, is obviously loaded with the emotions of lived experience. I began by writing a narrative account but, after writing a few pages, a poem came to mind, and I then could not write in any other way. The use of poetry not only allowed me to put salient features of my baggage in a very condensed form, it also revealed something of my 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1992, p.223). Reay (1995), whilst acknowledging that Bourdieu does not define habitus, characterising its indeterminacy by using different notions of it at different times, attempts to define it in the following way:

> I envisage habitus as a deep, interior, epicentre containing many matrices. These matrices demarcate the extent of choices available to any one individual. Choices are bounded by the framework of opportunities and constraints the person finds herself [sic] in, her [sic] external circumstances. However, within Bourdieu's theoretical framework she [sic] is also circumscribed by an internalised framework which makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable (p.354).

The use of poetry allowed me to reveal implicitly to the reader something of my habitus, which may have been influential, not only in the writing of this thesis, but also in the initial taking up of the task of the research.

My stories and poems might be considered as 'impressionist tales' (Van Maanen, 1988, p.107). I have created a fictitious text from 'lived' events, the 'validity'/trustworthiness of which might be questioned by those imbued with a particular epistemological and ontological stance. This issue is discussed in Chapter Nine.

The visual impact of the text

Whilst writing using my word processor, I became aware that the use of the different fonts which were at my disposal, could offer an added conduit for interpretation and meaning. Most writers use what Lambert (1964) describes as a 'cold, functional typography' (p.5) ignoring the creative possibilities of different typographical styles. But Richardson (1990) argues against the use of different type styles contending the reader may choose to ignore certain parts of the text. However, I agree with Stone's (1991) contention that different font styles provide 'more *voices* [my emphasis] on the typographic stage - a larger cast of characters for helping breathe life into a text' (p.11). Stone points to the fact that one of the fonts he created has been used in children's books, perhaps because it appears 'soft, open and friendly' (p.34). I selected Arial as a font to present my account of the nursery classes because of its child-friendly appearance. Having decided to present my work using different fonts, I was interested to read that Derrida used different typographical styles in the presentation of his radical work 'Glas' (Collins and Mayblin, 1996). He wrote two accounts, one on a philosopher, a high ranking academic, and one on a writer, an illegitimately-born thief and homosexual. The accounts were written alongside one another in two columns and in different typefaces. Looking at a page from this text reproduced in Collins and Mayblin (1996), I noticed that Derrida had chosen to represent the philosopher in a small, rounded typeface, but that

used for the writer was larger and, as it appeared to me, of a more formal shape. Was Derrida giving the writer greater prestige in this style of presentation? That is my interpretation, but was it Derrida's intention? This question leads me on to consider the author-text-reader relationship.

Author-text-reader: the destination of the text

At various points in this account I have referred to the reader of the text. Whilst writing, I have the reader(s) in mind. I wrote in my journal:

> *When writing I am here at the moment physically, but mentally I am both in the past and in the future, in the past, living the research experience, and in the future, attempting to empathise with the reader who I hope will experience my experience vicariously.* 27/11/96

(Interestingly, Derrida would deny the existence of a metaphysical presence such as this (Denzin, 1994)).

Perhaps human empathic awareness, and also part of me which wants to entertain (Dramatist Me), has resulted in my efforts to produce a multivoiced, mixed-genre text, for I not only have to consider my own subjectivity, but also that of the reader.

I slip from what might be considered a 'paradigmatic mode' of presentation to 'narrative mode', using various rhetorical devices from bar graphs to poetry. But this happens, not only as a result of the influence of my baggage, but also in consideration of the reader's baggage. There are those who might want to read a thick description, finding tables and bar graphs nullifying to the senses. And there are those

who seek a broad overview of parts of the research in the form of descriptive statistics. But then again, there is my doubt. Whilst acknowledging that I share some meanings with the reader, I cannot be sure how s/he will interpret my text.

Barone (1990) highlights the way in which the reader *uses* the text rather than *responds* to it, and, calling on her/his own experience reconstructs the experience offered in the text. The author-text-reader interrelationship is described by Tyler (1986, p.133) as 'an emergent mind that has no individual locus, being instead an infinity of possible loci'. Interpretation of the text by the reader therefore must be considered indeterminate. I am further confounded by Denzin's (1994) description of Derrida's position on textual construction which states that 'Language does not permit speakers or writers to ever have full access to the meaning they are trying to convey' (p.189). I can only *try* to express my meaning in the text, and feel justified in saying that the reader will make of it what s/he will, for as Packwood and Sikes (1996) assert, the interpretation of the research text 'will depend upon the epistemological stance of the reader' (p.343).

Afterthought: a message to the reader

Through the title of this section on writing, I hoped to illustrate to the reader that I have just '*dipped my toes* into the postmodernist stream'. My move to postmodernism came late in my study as a result of my

problems with representation of context and voices as a text. I conceived the study within a different set of epistemological and ontological assumptions to those which were influential during the final stages of the work. Hence, much of what follows is written within the constraints of the original 'postpositivist' paradigm. Whilst this writing might be considered to be partially within Bruner's (1986) 'paradigmatic mode' (p.12), I do put my 'self' into the text, and therefore acknowledge the subjective, partial and situated nature of my research.

'Postpositivist' and 'postmodernist' threads therefore run through the thesis, and hence in the last chapter I offer a deconstructive discussion which considers my research from both perspectives.

Part Two:
Context and Processes

Chapter Three

The Macrosystem

Introduction

In this chapter I will describe the broader social context of the nursery classes in my study. (I gave an outline of Bronfenbrenner's (1992) revised definition of the macrosystem in Chapter Two.) I will first place the nursery classes within their historical context by describing the provision of pre-school education in the UK at the time of the study and the background to that provision. The philosophical and psychological theories underpinning pedagogy and curriculum in nursery education are then briefly considered, and I follow this with a discussion of the concept of 'quality' in nursery education. Lastly, I will provide a description of

the provision of nursery education within the LEA, through analysis of data collected during the survey.

Patterns of nursery education provision in the UK

Pre-school provision in the UK is diverse and offers differential experiences for pre-school children. The majority of 3 and 4-year-old children (60%) attend pre-school playgroups (figure for 1991 given in Ball, 1994) run by voluntary organisations, usually groups of parents. A further 26% attend local education authority nursery classes and schools staffed by qualified teachers and nursery nurses. Others attend private nurseries or schools, local authority day nurseries or are in reception classes (4-year-olds) in state primary schools. Playgroups, local authority day nurseries and private nurseries are overseen by social services departments, which stress care rather than educational aspects. Provision in state nursery classes, nursery schools and reception classes is the responsibility of local education authorities which place emphasis on education. Hence, the very different responsibilities of the two departments, and lack of co-ordination between them (Penn, 1994), has further extended the heterogeneity in nursery provision in the UK.

Historical background to nursery provision in the UK: a brief overview.

The Education Act 1870 first introduced the notion that children should be admitted to school at the age of five, though it was not until the

Education Act 1880 that attendance became a national requirement for children aged between five and fourteen years (Blackstone, 1971).

Children younger than five years of age had been admitted into schools since the middle of the nineteenth century. But in 1905, a Board of Education report highlighted the inappropriateness of such provision for these children. Recommendations were made that children under the age of five years should receive a different type of education to that provided in the elementary schools (Woodhead, 1989). The effect of this report was to exclude young children from schools, no other provision being offered.

Various Government recommendations have followed since the 1905 Report, notably in the Education Act 1944 which required nursery education to be provided according to local need. The Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) recommended that the statutory school age for children should be defined as the September term following their fifth birthday, and that full-time schooling should not be compulsory until a child's sixth birthday. These two recommendations would have the effect of 'releasing resources for provision of part-time nursery education for all who want it' (para.358[d]). This view has more recently been expounded by Ball (1994). Margaret Thatcher, as Secretary of State for Education, proposed in her White Paper that 50% of three-year-olds and 90% of four-year-olds would have nursery places. However, whilst LEAs were offered loans in order to set up nursery schools and classes, most did not

take them up since there was no funding to maintain such establishments once they were built (Osborn and Milbank, 1987).

The voluntary playgroup movement evolved to meet the needs of children who would otherwise not have access to nursery education. However, Browne (1996) points out that playgroups are often unable to provide the same educational standards as nursery classes and nursery schools 'because of their lack of purpose-built accommodation, low-levels of public-funding, lack of trained nursery teachers and relatively low level of training' (p.375), and criticises successive governments for accepting the cheap alternative to state-funded nursery education.

Recent developments

The Rumbold Report (DES, 1990) highlights the diversity of provision in services for under-fives in the UK, but points out that effectiveness is not related to type of provision. The National Commission on Education (1993) and the Royal Society of Arts Report (Ball, 1994) recommend that high quality, public-funded nursery education should be made available to all 3 and 4-year-olds. The Conservative Government introduced a voucher scheme early in 1997 which allowed parents to "buy" nursery education for their children in the state, voluntary or private sector. Nursery education thus became subject to market forces, a situation which some believe will produce 'quality' provision (DFE, 1992; Soskin, 1995). The new Labour Government, abolished the voucher scheme, calling on LEAs to draw up plans for the provision of

nursery education for four-year-olds, in collaboration with the private and voluntary sector, by February 1998 (Ghouri, 1997).

Despite a paucity of economic support, some local education authorities have managed to fund comparatively high levels of nursery provision (Woodhead, 1989). Browne (1996) points out that in 1992 Hillingdon, Outer London, provided nursery education for 50% of its 3- and 4-year-olds. Conversely, Gloucestershire provided none, instead placing 94% of 4-year-olds in reception classes. As in the 1905 Board of Education Report, such provision has been recently highlighted as inappropriate educational experience for such young children (Ghaye and Pascal, 1989; Pascal, 1990; DES, 1990; HMI, 1993). Indeed, research by NFER (Sharp et al., 1994) illustrated that children's performance in Key Stage One tests was inversely related to the age at which they started school. Those who were youngest (i.e. close to the age of four) performed the least well in the tests, perhaps indicating that they had been subjected to formal schooling too early.

Pedagogy and curriculum: philosophical and psychological background

Pedagogy and curriculum are inextricably linked, and hence I will discuss them together. I will give brief consideration to the philosophical and psychological 'theories' instrumental in the evolution of the practices adopted in early years education today. I suspend 'theories' in quotation marks, highlighting the postmodernist contention that all theories are

cultural artefacts. From a postmodern perspective these 'theories' might be considered as metanarratives (Packwood and Sikes, 1995) or texts (Denzin, 1994) which imbue beliefs and ideologies amongst professionals in nursery education. I have selected those 'theories' which have particular relevance to my study, and to my own philosophies on the education of young children.

Imbuing philosophies

The Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) was instrumental in legitimising the adoption of a 'child-centred' pedagogy in primary schools in the UK. Such a pedagogy has its roots in the educational ideas of Pestalozzi (1746-1827) who was much influenced by the philosophies of Rousseau (Curtis and Boultwood, 1965). Pestalozzi's notions that education should be based upon the *interests of the child*, that children should learn through *self-activity* rather than that imposed by teachers, and that children should be treated with respect, were later to underpin the work of Froebel, Dewey and MacMillan (Adelman, 1985). Bernstein (1977) terms child-centred styles of teaching and learning 'invisible pedagogies', and the more didactic styles 'visible pedagogies', explaining:

> The basic difference between visible and invisible pedagogies is in the *manner* [original emphasis] in which criteria are transmitted and in the degree of specificity of the criteria. The more implicit the manner of transmission and the more diffuse the criteria the more invisible the pedagogy; the more specific the criteria, the more explicit the manner of their transmission, the more visible the pedagogy (p.511).

Whilst recognising the importance of children's self-directed play, Froebel (1782-1852) introduced structured activities into his curriculum in the form of the 'Gifts and Occupations', which have been criticised for being over-directed (Adelman, 1985). Froebel believed that children should experience the natural world first hand and placed much emphasis on outdoor activities (hence the term Kindergarten).

The philosophies of Montessori (1869-1952) may also be considered influential in today's nursery curriculum and pedagogy. She developed a more didactic approach than Froebel, offering children learning experiences in a planned environment. Although her rather rigid methods have not been universally accepted, her main contributions to nursery education are the provision of child-size furniture and the adoption of some of her mathematical and sensorial equipment (Curtis, 1986). Bruce (1987) lists commonalities in the philosophies of Froebel and Montessori. Those which are of particular relevance to my study, and are congruent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1992) theory of human development are:

* The people (both adults and children) with whom the child interacts are of central importance.

* The child's education is seen as an interaction between the child and the environment, including, in particular, other people and knowledge itself.

(Bruce, 1987, p.10).

Imbuing psychologies

The Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) based its support for a child-centred pedagogy on Piagetian notions of the child as an active *constructor* of knowledge, who develops through interaction with the environment (congruent with Rousseau (Lefrancois, 1990)). His constructivist ideas regarding the development of knowledge underpin well-run child-centred programmes (Athey, 1990). In particular, Piaget's concepts of assimilation (reacting on the basis of previous knowledge) and accommodation (adjustments in understanding) can be considered as consistent with Bernstein's concept of invisible pedagogies.

Vygotsky (1983) stresses the role of the adult in children's learning, asserting 'With assistance, every child can do more than he [sic] can by himself - although only within the limits set by the state of his development' (p.267-268). These limits are set within what Vygotsky terms the 'zone of proximal development' (1983, p.268). Such a stance is also evident in Bruner's (1986) theory of 'scaffolding' (p.74), in which the adult acts as an enabler for the child's learning to take place.

Defining 'quality' in nursery education

Much past research into 'quality' in nursery education has adopted a *static* definition, using universal measures such as staff/child ratios, resources and curriculum which are associated with behavioural and psychological outcomes (Sylva, 1994). The use of this positivistic model

in defining 'quality', in an attempt to be 'scientific' and 'objective', is exclusionary, only portraying the views of 'experts' and professionals (Pence and Moss, 1994). Pence and Moss (1994) maintain that 'quality' is:

> ...a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interest, rather than an objective and universal reality (p. 172).

The authors argue for adopting a relativistic, values-based definition of 'quality' in all early childhood services, the views of all 'stakeholders' being taken into account. This more 'inclusionary' (Pence and Moss, 1994, p.174) approach to defining 'quality' is adopted in my study, which explores the views and opinions of staff, parents and children within context. Such a relativistic definition of 'quality' might be considered congruent with a postmodern perspective, since it is *open* and emphasises *difference*. However, since much research into 'quality' in pre-school education has adopted positivistic models, when I discuss this research a *static* definition of 'quality' is assumed.

Ball (1994), reviewing research into the effects of early education upon pre-school children, concludes:

> The evidence shows that it is *high quality* (original emphasis) early education that leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits in children.
> (p. 18)

He suggests the following major factors which might be associated with 'high quality' provision - 'the early learning curriculum; the selection,

training and continuity of staff; staff:children ratios; and also (but less critically) the buildings and equipment of the early learning centre; the role of parents' (Ball, 1994, p.18).

The Rumbold Report (DES, 1990) endorses the recommendation of an earlier White Paper 'Better Schools' (DES, 1985) that young children's education should be based upon play. The report suggests quality education for the under-fives should provide 'areas of learning and experience' (p.37), aesthetic and creative, human and social, language and literacy, mathematics, physical, science, spiritual and moral and technological.

Much research into 'quality' in early years education has made comparisons between different *types* of provision (for example, Jowett and Sylva, 1986; Lera et al., 1996), or has focused on one particular aspect, such as the curriculum (for example, Schweinhart et al., 1986). However, one study (Statham and Brophy, 1992) compared 45 playgroups using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms and Clifford, 1980) to assess the 'quality' of each setting. This scale produces numerical ratings of aspects of early childhood settings which are thought to be indicators of 'quality'. Brophy and Statham (1994) point out the limitations of applying such a scale as it pays insufficient attention to aspects such as interpersonal relationships and parental involvement.

The local education authority in which the study was employed

The present study was conducted in a local education authority (LEA) which provides nursery education in the form of nursery classes attached to some primary schools. At the time of fieldwork for my study (1994-6), the nursery classes had been operational for varying periods of time up to 27 years. Those which had been in operation for just 5 years were set up in the first phase of a programme designed to increase the provision of nursery education within the LEA, the second phase being implemented as the present study progressed. Staff had received little in-service training relating to nursery education when the study began, but the LEA was about to increase this provision through the reorganisation of funding. At the time the study took place the LEA had no written policy on nursery education, apart from that concerning the admission of children to nursery classes. To preserve anonymity the percentage of children attending them will not be given here. However, all the nursery classes in the study were situated in Educational Priority Areas (CACE, 1967), according to criteria set by the LEA.

Nursery class provision within the local education authority: the survey

My purpose in offering the following account is twofold: to situate my study within the context of nursery education provision throughout the LEA, and relate findings to some of the extensive relevant literature. I

have interspersed the text with vignettes which reveal something of my 'lived experience' (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992a, p.3) of the research process. Three asterisks denote a change in genre (Ronai, 1992). The cross-case matrix resulting from my analysis is given in Table 3.1 (over).

The nursery classes were well-spread geographically, being situated in a variety of areas - inner-city, suburban, rural.

* * *

Setting off very early in the morning, it was still dark. A thick, wintry mist made it difficult for me to see where I was going. I had to reach a school over sixty miles from my home by 8.15am so that I could speak to the headteacher and observe the children arriving with their parents. Would I make it? The school was situated in a rural area, but to reach it I had to drive through the centre of a city which had a complicated, five-lane one-way system. The mist was still thick, and I couldn't see the road markings until I was virtually on top of them. On my third circuit I suddenly realised which lane I should take, and crossed over. But the city folk were very friendly. They sounded their horns and waved to me, and I waved back.

* * *

Table 3.1 - SUMMARY OF NURSERY CLASS ATTRIBUTES

School	Catchment SEG and ethnicity	Full or part-time	No. of terms	Age of building (years)	Type of classroom	No. of years operating as a nursery	Style of teaching and learning	No. of staff: trained and untrained	Ope ness pare
A	mixed white	part	3 max	30+	purpose-built (50s)	5	#	4 *	++
B	lower white	part	2 or 3	20+	infant classroom	7	# # # #	2	+
C	lower white	part	1	30+	purpose-built	25+	# # # # #	3	+
D	mixed white	full	1	100+	purpose-built(50s)	27+	#	2 *	++
E	mixed white	part	2	20+	purpose-built	5	# # # # #	3	+
F	lower; 80% ethnic min.	part	5	100+	conversion	27+	# # #	3 **	++
G	mixed white	part	2	20+	purpose-built	27	# #	3 **	++
H	mixed/low white	part	2	20+	purpose-built	12	# #	2	+
I	mixed white	full	2	20+	infant classroom	10	# # # # #	2	+
J	mixed white	part	2	20+	infant classroom	5	# # #	3 **	+++
K	mixed white	part	2	20+	purpose-built	14	# #	3 *	+
L	lower; 30% ethnic min.	full/ part	2-3	20+	purpose-built	27+	# #	4	++
M	lower; 30% ethnic min.	part	2	20+	infant classroom	new	# # #	4**	++
N	mixed white	part	2-3	20+	purpose-built	14	?	4	+
O	mixed white	part	2	100+	converted bungalow	new	# # # # #	2	+
P	mixed white	part	2-3	5	purpose-built	20+ in old building	# #	2 *	++
Q	mixed white	part	1	20+	purpose-built	22	# #	3**	++
R	mixed white	part	2-3	100+	purpose-built(70s)	new	# # #	4 *	++
S	lower white	part	2-3	40	conversion	new	# #	3	+
T	mixed white	part	up to 5	20+	purpose-built	new	# # #	2 * + parent	+++
U	mixed/low white	part	2-3	20+	conversion	new	# # #	3 *	++
V	mixed white	part	2-3	40+	conversion	new	# #	3	++
W	mixed white	part	2-3	60+	conversion	new	# #	3 *	++
X	mixed/mid. white	part	2	100+	purpose-built	new	# #	2 *	++
Y	mixed/mid. white	part	2-3	30+	infant classroom	6	# #	3 * + parent	+++
Z	mixed white	part	2-3	20+	purpose-built (70s)	new	# # #	3 *	+++
AA	mixed/low white	part	2-3	30+	conversion	6	# # # #	3 *	+++

* nursery teacher had initial nursery training
** nursery teacher not initially nursery trained, some in-service

mainly free-play - little intervention
mainly free-play - adult intervention/support (topics)
mainly free-play - adult intervention/support (child-centred)
adult direction + some free-play
adult direction + some free play - formal academic input

\+ against involving parents
++ indifferent or no encouragement for parents to become involved
+++ some encouragement for parents to become involved
++++ active involvement of parents

Classes were housed in different types of building, some in purpose-built accommodation, others in converted infant classrooms. Children experienced varying periods of time in nursery class; some full-time attendance, some part-time; some attending for up to five terms, some only *one*. A teacher in one class, in which the children experienced only one term of nursery education, commented:

It's like a production line .....no time to get
to know the children properly or see real progression.

The Staff

* * *

It was lunchtime. I went into the school and waited outside the secretary's office. After waiting for ten minutes or so, I was greeted by a rather glamorous member of staff - red tartan suit with straight knee-length skirt, stiletto-heeled shoes, heavy make-up and impeccably groomed hair, rings like rocks on her fingers, and long painted finger nails. I was completely bowled over when I realised that she was the *nursery teacher.* How did she play in the sand with those nails? She ushered me over to the nursery classroom, saying that she was 'terribly' glad that I had come because I could work with a group of children sorting out the puzzles. I was shown into an area partitioned from the main classroom. And that's where I stayed for the whole session, unable to make any observations other than the children's arrival and departure with their parents.

* * *

Numbers of staff/adults varied in the different classes, although the number of 'qualified' staff was the same throughout i.e. one full-time nursery teacher and one full-time nursery nurse (NNEB) in each class. Only 12 of the 27 nursery teachers had received initial training in teaching the nursery age-group; others were infant, junior or secondary trained. Some had pursued in-service training such as Early Years Certificates or modules in an M.A. in Early Years. Classes F, L and M also had a full-time language assistant (Asian) due to the high proportion of children in the class for whom English was a second language.

Variation occurred in the numbers of untrained, unpaid adults working in the classes - first and second year NNEB students, young people on work experience schemes, language assistants and assistants assigned to give one-to-one contact with certain children who had special educational needs and, occasionally, parents. Therefore, adult/child ratios differed such that some classes had a ratio of 1:15, many 1:10, whilst one (Class M) had a ratio of 1:4 or 5, depending on the day. An adult/child ratio of 1:7 was considered to be optimal, and an indicator of high quality, in a study of early day-care in the USA (Howes, 1990). Children in care centres where the adult/child ratios were between 1:10 and 1:15 were found to be more distractible, less task-oriented and to have more social adjustment problems in school than those who had attended 'high quality' centres which had higher ratios of adults to children. Interestingly, children have been observed to make more contacts with

adults, and fewer interactions with peers, in nursery settings which have high adult to child ratios (O' Connor, 1975).

The Classrooms

The classrooms varied in size and provision of facilities. As mentioned earlier, some classrooms were large, purpose-built for nursery education; others were converted infant classrooms, or consisted of an amalgamation of two or three rooms.

Only 4 nursery classes were without their own separate outdoor play area. These classes had a short, supervised session on the main playground each day when the rest of the school was indoors. All but 5 classes had their own toilets, but the number of toilet cubicles varied such that one classroom had 8 cubicles serving 30 children, while another had only one for the same number of children. In the latter case inevitable queues of children resulted which, besides wasting valuable time, could cause physical problems and anxieties in such young children. The kitchens, in those classrooms which had one, housed washing machines, refrigerators and cookers, the latter being used for the children's baking activities.

Classroom organisation

Organisation of space was, to some extent, dependent upon the size of the room. Nursery teachers in some former infant classrooms complained to me about of lack of space. These classrooms were similar to reception

classrooms in layout, having a large number of tables and chairs for sedentary tasks. Teachers in these classes said they had no training in the teaching of the nursery age-group. Other nursery classrooms, also originally built as infant classrooms, were organised in such a way that many different activity areas were available for the children, numbers of tables and chairs being kept to a minimum. Teachers in these classes had received some training for this age-group. I have placed the floor plans of classes I and M in Appendix A2, since these illustrate how two similar former infant classrooms might be organised to provide very different learning experiences.

The physical organisation of the nursery classroom may have important effects on the behaviour of the children within it. Neill (1982) carried out systematic observation of twenty pre-school children in 3 nursery schools and 2 day nurseries. The open nature of classrooms had a significant effect on behaviour. In those classrooms which were open-plan, children spent more time wandering about, doing nothing, and committed more acts of aggression than in those which were divided up into areas. However, Neill (1982) did not consider observer effects. In the open-plan classroom the observer may be able to be discreet in making observations as s/he can view the whole area at once. Conversely, the classroom divided into small areas into which the observer has to enter, may make the observer more obvious to the

children, with subsequent effects on behaviour (i.e. they may take part in fewer acts of aggression).

Equipment and resources

Equipment and resources were generally in good condition. Seventeen classes had computers and printers with a range of pre-school programs, and twelve classes had their own televisions and video recorders. Animals, ranging from stick insects to rabbits, were kept in eight of the classrooms. Only one class had a piano. The way in which the equipment was organised reflected the style of learning offered within the class, which is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Curriculum and style of teaching and learning

The classes differed most in their curriculum and their style of teaching and learning. As three teachers explained to me when asked if they followed a set curriculum:

> *No, no set curriculum as such*

> *You could say we work towards the National Curriculum*

> *Oh, yes ..... definitely based on the National Curriculum. I have to show the head my plans each week to show that I'm hitting the* [NC attainment] *targets.*

Some nursery teachers mentioned numeracy, literacy and social skills as being the most important aspects of their programmes, whilst others said that they hoped they offered children a variety of 'areas of experience' (as recommended in the Rumbold Report, DES,1990). Since the children in the LEA experienced different periods of time in nursery class, the aims of the curriculum may be different in each. The nursery teacher in Class E, where children spent just one term part-time, commented that the experience in nursery class was for:

> *settling into school ..... getting used to*
> *sitting down and listening*

However, Hofkins (1995) maintained that the early years curriculum should never be simply a preparation for school 'but a worthwhile experience in itself' (pIII).

Some teachers planned their class activities around a topic or theme such as 'transport', 'patterns' etc., with some producing detailed termly and weekly plans. Six teachers used a topic as a starting point or as a loose framework, diverging into areas of the children's interest as they arose. One explained that she found the strict adherence to a topic or theme inappropriate for this age range, since the children may become bored quickly and fail to appreciate any cross-curricular links. The view that rigid topic/theme based curricula are unsuitable for pre-school children is shared by Penn (1994) who questions whether a theme can

enrich learning, or whether young children can maintain interest in it for long periods of time.

The extent to which the curriculum was based upon active, experiential learning and free-play varied across the classes (see Table 3.1, p.114). Those classes influenced strongly by the National Curriculum, or with prime emphasis on literacy and numeracy, offered fewer opportunities for children to engage in experiential learning through play. I observed children being directed to tasks and receiving much adult direction, and carpet sessions of long duration. In some classes, children took part in formal academic tasks in the form of worksheets, school maths and language scheme workbooks, or tracing over scribed sentences. The inappropriate nature of such practices is well documented. A recent a study in Portugal (Nabuco and Sylva, 1997) compared the effects of three different pre-school programmes, 'formal skills', unstructured 'progressive' and 'High/Scope', upon various outcomes in primary school children. The High/Scope programme was developed in the USA as part of the Head Start initiative and has been associated with particular cognitive benefits for children (Schweinhart et al., 1993). High/Scope incorporates a 'plan, do and review' method into its curriculum, in which children are encouraged to plan what they will do, carry out the plans and then review what they have done. On entry into school, children in the Nabuco and Sylva (1997) study who had been subjected to 'formal skills' and 'progressive' programmes during their

pre-school education, did not perform as well at reading and writing as those who had experienced High/Scope. The 'formal skills' programme was also associated with high levels of anxiety in children.

The impact of top-down processes upon the nursery curriculum

Some nursery teachers felt pressure from the headteacher or other teachers in the school to include formal aspects of language and number work in the nursery class. One teacher explained:

> *They* [the other teachers] *are under pressure from the National Curriculum and they want me to start formal work because they think that what the children are doing in here* [nursery] *is a waste of time ..... it's just playing about.*

Another teacher confided:

> *I've been battling for three years .....* [against pressure from other staff] *but I'm sticking to what I believe is right for these children.*

Management of children's behaviour

I included management of children's behaviour as an item on the checklist, since positive behaviour management by staff was a factor utilised as a 'quality' indicator in a study of day nurseries by McGuire and Richman (1989). However, in the present study, this particular item was difficult to assess in just one session of observation, since the behaviour of staff could have been susceptible to observer effects (Robson, 1993). Some nursery teachers interacted with the children in a warm 'motherly' manner

(lots of cuddles, open smiles during conversation), but were firm in dealing with disciplinary matters. These staff made use of praise rather than chastisement. Others were more formal in their approach; for example, one teacher did not smile once when talking to the children and made many negative comments in her attempts to discipline them.

Assessment and record keeping

Both Curtis (1986) and the Rumbold Report (DES, 1990) highlight the importance of assessment and record keeping during the pre-school years. Methods of assessment and record keeping varied across the classes visited. Two teachers admitted that they did not assess the children at all during their stay in the nursery class; records consisted of a few samples of 'work' (drawings etc.) which were passed on to the reception teacher. One expressed her standpoint against keeping detailed records and passing them on to other teachers:

> *I don't like to think of children being labelled at such a young age.*

Other nursery teachers kept 'tick-lists of skills' and pupil profiles containing work samples, photographs etc., whilst the new nursery classes were still 'experimenting' with their methods of assessment and record keeping.

Parental involvement and home/school links

Margaret McMillan considered that the parents' role should be seen as an intrinsic part of nursery education (Dowling, 1992). The Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) highlighted the need for parental involvement in all facets of the education of children, laying particular stress on the necessity for co-operation between the home and the nursery. Parents were to be considered as partners and should have 'close knowledge of what schools are doing and why' (para:324). The report postulated that contact with parents was to be considered a duty of nursery staff.

The extent to which parents were involved in the nursery education of their children in my study and the characteristics of staff/parent relationships varied greatly. Many staff exhibited a general reluctance to involve parents in the work of the nursery classroom. When asked if parents were ever involved in the work of the classroom, one teacher replied:

> *I occasionally ask a past parent to help, but not a parent of a child in the class. Coming here should be a break from home .... getting ready for school* (infant-trained)

In contrast, the nursery teacher in Class T commented:

> *When I started working in this class I just could not accept that parents came along with their children and then just left.* (nursery/infant trained)

She had previously worked in nurseries in which parents were very much involved in the work of the class and she felt that this was the whole crux of nursery education. She had initially asked for parent helpers but had no offers. However, after starting a weekly lunch-club to which parents came, ate lunch with their children and chatted to staff, people began coming forward.

Formal contacts between parents and staff were made during open evenings in all classes, and informal contacts made when parents brought their children to the nursery at the start of a session and collected them at the end. However, the amount of contact observed between parents and staff varied. In some classes the teacher unlocked the classroom door at 9.00 am, the children entered and the parents left immediately. The collection procedure was similar, although some parents did venture into the cloakroom to help children put on their coats. In other nurseries the nursery nurse or teacher greeted parents and children as they arrived for the session. Some nursery teachers encouraged parents to linger at the beginning of sessions so that they could chat to staff and observe the types of activities in which their children might take part.

Attitudes of staff towards parents

The negative attitude held by nursery staff towards certain groups of parents was clearly evident in some nursery classes. One teacher commented:

Half of them (the parents) *couldn't care less.*

Another teacher, when talking about an Open University management course upon which she had been embarking, mentioned that she had interviewed some parents in order to gauge their attitudes to the nursery; however she admitted:

> *....but I only asked the more middle-class parents. I didn't think the others would have anything to say.*

Assumptions about deficiencies in the home were mainly related to language development.

A nursery nurse in one class explained how she and the nursery teacher had moved into the class as a team when it had opened. The class from which they had moved contained many children from low-income families and also a sizeable proportion (30%) of children from minority ethnic groups. Their present class contained a higher proportion of white, middle-class children. The nursery nurse commented:

> *Well, it's done us good coming here. We were getting lazy down at Bore Road ..... we set our standards low ... you know, the parents and all that. But here we've had to buck up our ideas because we've got a different kind of parents.*

These findings warrant further exploration into the impact of such attitudes upon the pattern of relationships occurring in the nursery class, and are considered in the third phase of the study.

The induction process

I included information on the checklist regarding the procedures adopted during the induction of children into the nursery class, since these may involve staff working closely with parents and establishes initial home/school links. Many classes operated a staggered entry system, with groups of children entering the class on different days over a two-week period. In some classes all the newcomers started at the same session, with the 'old stagers' taking part in a *separate* session. In this way new children did not have to cope with gaining entry into established groups of children, a problem highlighted in a study by Feldbaum et al. (1980). One nursery teacher reasoned:

> *They're* [the newcomers] *not invading the other children's space because they have found their way about, and how everything works, by exploring the nursery.*

Other nursery teachers preferred to mix newcomers with 'old stagers', the older children returning to class before the new entrants. Parents were usually invited to attend a meeting in the term before entry. With the exception of two classes, there appeared to be little indication of actual encouragement for parents to stay with their children. One teacher actively discouraged parents from staying in the classroom when children start nursery, commenting:

> *If the child is going to scream and be upset when the parent leaves, then he or she will do it whether the parent stays for the first few days or not* (infant-trained teacher).

Another teacher, who encouraged parents to stay during the first week of their children's first term in nursery class, held a very different view about induction; she explained:

> *It can be a difficult time for the parents, not just the children. They* (the parents) *might feel that we are taking over their child.....it's a big break.* (nursery/infant trained)

Six schools operated a home visiting scheme so that parents and children are met in their home surroundings before going to the school. However, the effectiveness of such visits is called into question by Bronfenbrenner (1979) who refers to a study by Karnes in which home visits:

> ...decreased the mother's sense of her own importance and efficacy and her active involvement as key figure in her child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.215).

All nursery teachers (except one) produced a brochure or leaflet which was given to parents when their children started nursery. Some brochures offered a brief résumé of school rules etc., whilst others gave detailed accounts of the aims and objectives of the staff in the nursery with regard to the educational experience they hoped to offer children.

Integration with, and entry into, main school

Research evidence suggests that starting school is a stressful experience for young children (Cleave et al., 1982; Ghaye and Pascal, 1989).

Blatchford et al. (1982) maintain one special function of nursery education could be to mitigate any discrepancies between the home setting and that provided by formal schooling at statutory school age.

All the classes in the present study integrated with the main school to some extent. Some classes simply used the hall once a week for PE, and used the main school computers. Other classes attended school assembly once or twice each week, with some occasionally conducting an assembly. A varying number of visits to the reception class were arranged by the nursery teachers during the half term before entry into main school.

Ironically, although attempts were made by all the staff in the nursery classes to integrate the children into the main school, some expressed feelings of their own isolation. Some of the classes were in separate buildings, or in wings separated from the main school. Nursery class staff did not have a mid-session coffee break and often did not have the chance to go to the staff room at lunch time, because of the amount of preparation needed for the next session. Consequently some nursery staff did not have much opportunity to mix informally with other staff members in the main school. Most discussions between nursery staff and the majority of main school staff took place at staff meetings. Main school staff's lack of understanding of the purposes of nursery education, indicated earlier, may be exacerbated by this seemingly restricted amount of contact.

Summary and discussion

The purpose of the survey was to explore the provision of nursery education within the LEA so that I could select nursery classes for further study. The checklist allowed me to collect descriptive information which would not have been possible using a standard, quantitative rating scale such as E.C.E.R.S. (Harms and Clifford, 1980), normally used to rate 'quality' in pre-school settings. The survey revealed considerable diversity in the provision of nursery education within the LEA. At the time the research took place, each nursery class operated autonomously, there being little co-ordination or provision of in-service training.

One salient aspect arising from the survey was that the styles of teaching and learning operating and the openness of the classes to parents, seemed to be linked to teachers' training background (see Table 3.1, p.114). The survey illustrates a possible macrosystem interaction in that insufficient funding, resulting in a lack of in-service training, may have caused the variable quality of provision of nursery education. Such diversity exists within a *national context* in which many different *types* of pre-school education are available and which Hofkins (1995) describes as 'rag bag provision with highly variable standards' (pIII).

Implications for the next phase

Having visited all accessible nursery classes within the LEA, I wanted to select a number of nursery classes which exhibited different characteristics and would hence operate as different microsystems in which perceptions

were developing. At this point in my research, I was mainly concerned with perceptions of parents and staff, since I did not know how much information I would be able to collect through interviewing the children. Although I had developed my interviewing technique whilst doing the survey, I had not used it for a whole session and did not know how the technique would be received by children in the nursery classes I had selected.

As a result of the survey, I selected the nursery classes (A, E and J in Table 3.1, p.114) for further study on the basis of the degree of *openness to parents,* the *style of teaching and learning* and the *physical environment* of the nursery classes, the last being stressed by Bronfenbrenner (1992) in his definition of the microsystem. The impact of staff attitudes towards certain groups of parents and their children upon the patterns of activities and relationships within the nursery class, also required consideration in the last phase.

The checklist had formed a useful device for collecting and recording information, and so I decided to use parts of this as a guide in making my field notes during general observations in the classroom. Certain factors, such as openness to parents and styles of teaching and learning, required more in-depth observation if interactions were to be recorded. Having discarded systematic target-child observations in favour of focused observations in the preliminary study, as explained in Chapter Two, I decided to use the latter as a means of obtaining detailed

descriptions of such aspects as openness to parents and style of teaching and learning. In this way, I hoped to make detailed records of interactions which might help to illustrate some of the processes occurring within the nursery classes.

Moving on into the next phase

So I have taken the reader with me on my 'Grand Tour'. We have considered some of the *texts* which might influence perceptions of nursery education, and placed the study within its historical context and the broad context of nursery provision within the LEA.

Now I will move on to 'visit' three selected nursery classes, or microsystems, which offer rather different experiences for the children attending them.

Chapter Four

The Microsystems

Three Nursery Classes

Introduction

This chapter forms a 'backdrop' for the following three chapters, providing descriptions of the context in which some perceptions of nursery education have developed, and also some of the processes occurring in those contexts.

Firstly, I will remind the reader of the selection process for the three nursery classes in which perceptions were explored. A discussion of the textual representation of the nursery classes then precedes descriptions of each. Finally, I will offer a comparative discussion of salient features arising from the descriptions.

Selection of the nursery classes

I selected three nursery classes (Harrington, Catsbury and Fiddlebrooke) which, based upon my analysis of data arising from the survey visits, offered *different* characteristics regarding the following:-

- size of classroom, facilities and resources;
- openness to parents;
- style of teaching and learning.

These attributes were those which exhibited the greatest diversity across all the nursery classes visited during the survey and might be considered as offering differential contextual characteristics and processes within the 'ecological niche' (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p.193) of the nursery class. However, the classes had *similar* macrosystem attributes, as follows:-

- located within a single LEA;
- social class of families (IIINM, IIIM, IV and V, according to the Registrar General's Classification of Occupations, OPCS, 1991, although two had a *very* small proportion of families in Social Class II);

and also had the following characteristics in common:-

- staffing - all had one nursery teacher and one nursery nurse (NNEB) and varying numbers of 'extra adults' (NNEB and work experience students);
- the nursery teachers were in the same age group (5 year range) and had undergone their initial teacher training in a similar period;
- similar admission policies (N=30 places in each class), which meant that all the children were within the same age-range (4 years to 4 years 8 months - but at Fiddlebrooke, all *older* children attended the *morning* session; therefore the age-range was 4 years 4 months to 4 years 8 months).

Textual representation of the nursery classes

Each nursery class might be considered a microsystem in which perceptions are developing. A detailed description of each setting, *and* of the actors within it, seems appropriate. But in writing this account, I am aware that I was also an actor. I can only portray in words what I saw and heard when I was present in each setting at that particular time. I accept myself as part of the process, together with all my infective baggage. So I am offering my interpretation of my reality as someone who was there. Such a stance is further justified by the fact that I only visited the settings for seven sessions, including the survey visit. Since I interviewed parents and staff in areas away from the main classroom, I was not able to observe classroom activities during this time. Therefore, actors in the setting, including me, may not have become habituated to the research process. In other words, the staff and children did not have time to become accustomed to my presence, nor did I have time to become accustomed to occurrences within the classroom, a situation which might arise during a protracted stay in the setting.

I can only process what I saw and heard within the limits of my hardware (my neurological characteristics resulting from my genetic endowment) and the software programs (my experiences or 'baggage') with which I have become loaded during my life journey. One feature of my hardware which I want to exploit is the compensatory effect of poor auditory processing; my visual processing is dominant, and I am,

therefore, the possessor of a good visual memory. Using my field notes as cues, I am able to vividly recall my visual memories, as if replaying a video. Hence, I will represent my focused observations as textual 'video clips', in the hope that I can capture my reality of the moment and convey this to the reader.

The tense in which I write becomes problematic. Since, the research took place at a time before now, 'now' being the time at which I am writing this account, and also the time at which the reader is reading it, I must write in the past tense. However, my 'video clips' are 'viewed' now (or at least within the following minutes), as the reader processes them, and are therefore written in the present tense.

But also I want to indulge in the use of my writing tool, the word processor, for, as explained in Chapter Two, I cannot ignore the fact that the visual impact of the text in itself offers an added conduit for description and interpretation of meaning. Hence, I will employ a variety of font styles and sizes and line spacings in the following way:-

- descriptions of the nursery classes - double spaced

- descriptions of actors within the setting will be represented in a smaller font with single spacing

- *video clips - with single spacing*

- my activities, thoughts and feelings during the 'video clips'

'Video clips' will be opened and closed by means of a sign (a large asterisk) in order to herald a change of genre.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, in order to describe each setting, I will take the reader through one session, as if it were my first visit; after

all it is a 'first visit' for the reader, and my first impressions, particularly of the physical attributes of the settings, were then most vivid, since I had not had time to fall victim to habituation. Although each description has been compiled from my observations made during seven visits (including the survey visit), I want to portray one *typical* session, highlighting my impressions of particularly salient aspects. Floor plans of the classrooms have been placed with each narrative account. Descriptions of actors have been compiled from my field notes and visual memories, and from information gained through the first question in my interview framework (see Appendix A3) together with informal conversation during my experience in the settings. Headteachers are referred to by their surnames, whilst nursery nurses and nursery teachers are referred to by their first names. Those were the names I used to address people while in the settings, and such usage is indicative of my perceived position as an actor within the research process.

The first part of this phase of the research process took me to Harrington First School.

Harrington Nursery

I approached the school by driving through a large council estate, composed of rows of mostly neatly-kept, older-type houses and three-storey blocks of flats. The houses were interspersed with spacious grassy areas, one being a children's play area with a variety of

apparatus, and another having a pond occupied by ducks. A busy shopping parade formed one focal point on the estate.

Having arrived at 8.25am (I had arranged to meet the headteacher at 8.30am), there were no children to be seen as I drove in through the school gates. The school was housed in a typical 1950s, flat-roofed building, which appeared to be in reasonable condition, and possessed a large playing field. A pathway and an area of grass were separated from the main car park by a low fence and a gate on which was displayed a large painted sign saying 'Welcome to Harrington Nursery'.

On going through the main school entrance, I was confronted with a glass screen, behind which sat the school secretary. Having introduced myself to her, she smiled warmly, pressed a button releasing the electronic lock on the door into the entrance hall, and asked me to go through and sit down to wait for the headteacher. I made my way over the thick, russet-coloured carpet and sat in one of two large armchairs, between which were a tropical fish aquarium and a small table, set with a potted plant and a table lamp. Bold displays of children's work covered the walls, together with large framed, commercially-produced prints. With no children in the vicinity, I felt as if I was visiting 'Harrington p.l.c.' I had hardly had time to take in the luxurious surroundings, when Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe (headteacher) bounded up, thrusting out her hand to greet me. She took me into her office and we discussed general details regarding the school such as the catchment area, number of terms the children spent in the nursery etc.

Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe was almost sixty and due to retire at the end of term. I must admit to being quite shocked when I discovered her age; she looked very much younger (still played hockey and tennis). She seemed rather sophisticated, with short blonde hair, make up and long drop earrings and wearing flowing floral suit. Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe told me that she trained to be a teacher after having her three children (she was now a great grandmother!), adding that she didn't know whether to go into teaching or hotel management. Teaching was a better option as it fitted around the children. Having trained for the infant age group, she began teaching in a small village school, having a class which spanned the 5-7 years age range. She then taught in a 'variety of schools' before gaining the headship at Harrington in 1980. The school was apparently very 'drab and grim' when she arrived, and she had the chance to 'brighten and liven it up'. When she felt her career needed some change, the chance to set up the nursery came along. She said that this 'gave a new zing to it all' and also offered her a new challenge, as it had done for Anne (nursery teacher), who was also experiencing a lull in her career.

After ten minutes of 'chat', Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe took me back through the entrance hall and into the nursery. We walked into the nursery's large entrance area. The luxury that had greeted me in the main school entrance hall was also present here. A thick, red carpet covered the floor. Several bookcases, adorned with table lamps, potted plants and fresh flowers, were arranged at one end of the room. A life-size toy donkey bearing a small blackboard, with the inscription 'We have (space for number) children here today', stood near the door, and next to it, a large wooden model of a roundabout displayed an assortment of children's books. On each side of the room were rows of coat hooks, on which hung PE kit bags (red for the morning session, and grey for the afternoon session). A small area near the entrance to the main school was enclosed by a screen on which was a sign saying 'Letterland'. The walls in this area were covered with 'Letterland' posters and wall mirrors, and cardboard letter shapes hung from the ceiling.

A woman came dashing up to us, smiling broadly. Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe introduced her as Anne, the nursery teacher, and then left the nursery.

Anne was in her early fifties. Unmarried, she had taught all her working life and now also cared for her octogenarian mother. A very lively lady, she was slim, bespectacled and had short, greying hair. She wore a brightly coloured culotte skirt with matching T-shirt. Her training had covered the teaching of the nursery/infant age group (3-7 years) and she had taught in two schools before arriving at Harrington,

mainly teaching in reception classes. Anne started teaching in inner London in a school which was situated in what she described as 'a very poor area', where parents were issued with tokens with which to buy clothes for their children at local shops. She found Harrington a very pleasant area to come to (remember though, that it was an EPA school) and had been teaching there for over twenty years, now as deputy head. When the opportunity came to set up a nursery class within the school, she jumped at the chance, her career being at a low ebb at that time. She went out visiting other nurseries (even some Montessori nurseries in Italy) in order to assess her own ability to cope with a nursery, and to glean ideas. Feeling confident that she could do better than those running nurseries elsewhere in the LEA, she set up the nursery class in collaboration with the headteacher.

Anne told me that the first children would be arriving shortly, for she allowed 30 minutes (8.45am - 9.15am) for registration at the beginning of each session. Parents could bring their children along at any time during this period, and linger if they wished.

*

CHECKING IN

8.45 am. Anne is sitting at a small table by the door of the entrance area, the class register set before her. (I am sitting on a cloakroom bench) *The table lamps have been switched on and Beethoven's 'Pastoral Symphony' plays very quietly in the background, creating a tranquil atmosphere.* (I feel as if I'm in the VIP lounge!) *Two mothers arrive with their children (three each), one pushing a pushchair and the other carrying a baby. Anne smiles and greets the group, marking the register at the same time. The two eldest children (boys) collect their registration cut-outs and put them on the felt board. One mother hands her baby to Anne, while she takes her toddler to the toilet. The other mother's toddler takes a soft toy from a basket and places it in a fabric pocket to 'register' herself. The two boys have begun unloading a trolley full of large wooden building bricks. More mothers/fathers/carers are arriving and children registering. Anne is trying to mark the register whilst simultaneously holding the baby and talking to a father. Beethoven's Pastoral is now drowned in the hum of chattering parents/carers. Children are dashing off to the main classroom, some dragging their parents with them. Anne is still holding the baby.*

*

Once all the parents had gone, Anne showed me around other parts of the nursery. The toilets were situated in a room next to the entrance area, there being 8 cubicles, each one with its own child-size toilet and decorated with red and white nursery pictures. Small hand-basins were set into a plastic work surface, on which were placed containers

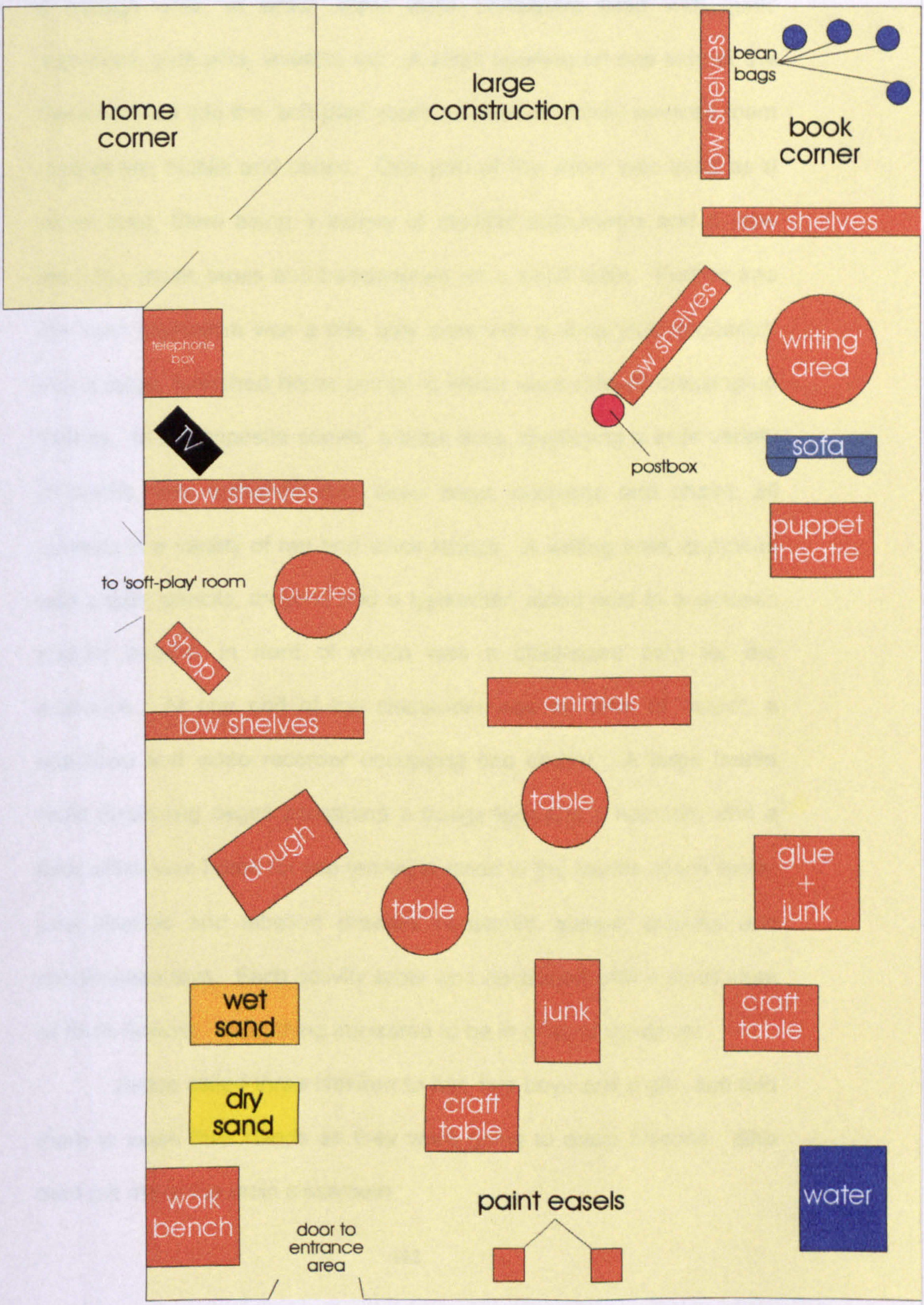
of liquid soap and small vases of flowers. The corner of the room was decorated with a display of shells and bars of soap of different shapes and sizes, and red and white curtains hung at the windows. Feeling amazed by what I had seen, I was led by Anne into the main part of the nursery. Passing more table lamps, a tropical fish tank and examples of children's work hung in picture frames, we came to the kitchen; this was, like the toilets, decorated in red and white, and was fitted with a range of kitchen units, a washing machine and a fridge. Outside the kitchen was the 'cookery area', surrounded by low shelving on which stood containers filled with ingredients for cooking. Next to the kitchen was Anne's office, the door bearing a sign saying 'Smile'; I could not help but obey. We spent a few moments here whilst she explained to me a little about her commitment to independent learning through play, and that she did not use topic planning, and her methods of assessing the children and record keeping etc.

Lastly, Anne showed me into her 'pièce de résistance', the main classroom into which all the children had now moved. To say that I was awe-struck would be an understatement. The room was enormous (25m x 15m approx.), having large windows on two sides which made it very light. It seemed to contain absolutely every type of resource imaginable. I could not help thinking how my own children would have loved to have spent time there, if they had been younger. In fact, I even began to wish that I was four again. Anne introduced me to Jackie, the nursery nurse, and then left to do some administrative work.

Jackie was in her early twenties, had long, dark hair and wore a calf-length skirt and T-shirt. Jackie had been at Harrington for almost a year and had recently got married. This was her first permanent post since leaving college, where she had obtained her NNEB qualification. She had done some temporary work in private nurseries prior to her appointment at Harrington.

Figure 4.1

Floor plan of Harrington (not to scale)



Jackie showed me around the room. There was a large wet/craft area containing a water tray plus a variety of 'water toys', a woodwork bench with small tools, wet and dry sand trays, paint easels, dough table and a collage area, in which there were containers filled with 'junk' resources, glue pots, scissors etc. A small opening on one side of the classroom led into the 'soft-play' room, containing plastic covered foam mattresses, blocks and cones. One part of this room was used as a music area, there being a variety of musical instruments and a tape recorder, music tapes and headphones on a small table. Further into the main classroom was a role play area with a shop plus 'groceries' and a large, furnished home corner in which were rails of dressing-up clothes. In the opposite corner, a book area, displaying a wide variety of books, was furnished with bean bags, cushions and chairs, all covered in a variety of red and white fabrics. A writing area, complete with paper, pencils, crayons and a typewriter, stood next to a wooden puppet theatre, in front of which was a child-sized sofa for the audience. At one end of the classroom was an area of carpet, a television and video recorder occupying one corner. A large trestle table displaying cages containing a budgerigar and a hamster, and a tank which was home for two terrapins stood in the middle of the room. Low shelves and labelled drawers contained games, puzzles and construction toys. Each activity table was decorated with a small vase of fresh flowers. Everything appeared to be in pristine condition.

Jackie called three children to her, two boys and a girl, and told them to wash their hands as they were going to make biscuits. She then left me in the main classroom.

The children were engaged in a variety of activities. Several were in the soft play room, supervised by an NNEB student. Two girls were in the book corner listening to a story read by a work-experience student. A group of boys were playing in the wet sand, and a boy and a girl were at the water tray. Some children were in the craft area. I moved to see what they were doing.

*

ARTIST AT WORK: THE MAKING OF A MASTERPIECE

Mark has come into the craft area and is putting on an apron. Without bothering to get the apron fastened at the back, he chooses a pale blue, triangular-shaped piece of paper from the paper pile and pegs it onto an easel. He looks at it for a moment and then moves swiftly to the collage area. He rummages through some ice cream cartons and selects some small pieces of polystyrene. Grasping the polystyrene against his chest, he picks up a small glue pot, moves quickly back to the easel and empties his bounty into the tray. Mark now takes one piece of polystyrene and spreads glue on one surface. Carefully he presses it onto one corner of the paper triangle. He looks at what he has done for a moment and then takes up another piece of polystyrene. He repeats the process, placing this second piece on another corner of the paper. But while making this addition to his creation, the first piece of polystyrene falls off. Mark snatches it off the floor, daubs it with more glue, and returns it to its original position. The second piece of polystyrene falls off and Mark painstakingly repeats his actions. With great care he glues another three pieces of polystyrene onto the paper, and stands for a moment looking at what he has done. His eyes are wide open. Trance-like, he is now moving to the collage area again. (James asks me to remove his apron) *Mark forages amongst the boxes and finds two milk bottle tops and a piece of dark blue cloth. As he walks back to the easel, he examines his finds. James dashes in front of him shouting, 'Pow! Pow!', and 'shoots' Mark in the chest. Mark does not seem to notice.* (I feel that if Mark is interrupted now, he might react aggressively.) *He returns to his easel, still wide-eyed and locked into his activity. With the same care he used in siting the polystyrene pieces, he glues on his latest collection, first the milk bottle tops and then the cloth. Again he stands and looks at his work. He reaches for a paint brush and, after loading it with dark blue paint, makes a winding stream between his treasures. Placing the paint brush back in the pot, he looks at his creation and then wipes his hands on the front of his apron. Job done ... masterpiece completed.*

*

Other children were in the home corner, at the dough and puzzle tables, or in the construction area. The children were free to take out any puzzles, games or construction toys they wanted to use, but they did not appear to put anything away after using it. Some children, having put on their dressing-up clothes, were playing with 'guns' which they had made in the construction area and were chasing around the area of the home corner making 'Pow! Pow!' noises. Several children appeared to be wandering from one activity to another, and a boy and a girl were rolling over the bean bags in the book corner. Anne was still doing her administrative work and Jackie was busy with the cookery group. The only adults in the classroom at this time were myself and the NNEB student, who was supervising the soft-play room. Suddenly, a scream came from the home corner and a girl ran out in tears. Anne, having heard the scream, came into the classroom and picked up the distressed girl, giving her a cuddle and taking her back into the home corner. Here Anne talked to the children about what had happened, the result being that the 'offender' was sent to her office for 'time out'. She then told the other children in the classroom to go out into the entrance area and sit on the floor. The children gathered together, joined by the cookery group, and sat and waited for Anne to arrive. Anne conducted the whole class session, first by talking about the day's weather and putting symbols on the weather board, and then by leading some songs.

*

LE MANS

'..... All day long.' The last verse of the 'Wheels on the Bus' has just been sung and the children are sitting on the carpet quietly, awaiting further instructions. Anne asks the children to look at the blackboard which hangs on the toy donkey. 'There are twenty six children here today. We need half. That's thirteen.' She chooses Claire to be 'counter'. Claire moves amongst the children and one by one touches them on the head as they all chant, 'One, two, three .....' Those who have been chosen go off to the toilets to wash their hands and then into the main classroom for drinks and biscuits. Anne tells the remaining group that they can go outside. (I move out with them and am standing at the edge of the playground.) *Like ants surrounding a jam pot, the children run to the toy shed on the playground and wait, some jumping up and down in anticipation. Anne comes out, unlocks the shed and begins to sort through the toys inside. The children eagerly wait outside, straining their necks to see which toy will come out first. A large, red bicycle emerges, and Russell and James grab it. Both boys momentarily cling to the bicycle and glare at each other. But Russell has hold of the handlebars, swings himself onto the saddle and makes a start in the race, making Ian lose his balance so that he falls to the ground. More toys follow - bicycles, tricycles, scooters, cars and tractors with trailers - and the children negotiate ownership. Anne calls Morris and Craig into the shed to help her carry out a concertina-like tunnel.* (I feel I should help, but need to continue taking field notes.) *Several other children join in to help pull the tunnel to its maximum length and then quickly slide inside. Now everyone has something with which to play. But Katie wants to be co-driver in Julian's truck. She pinches him and he drives off furiously, while she tries to catch him. Vehicles narrowly miss each other as the playground becomes a racetrack which does not seem to have a start or a finish. Gemma makes a pit stop, and peers into the tunnel. But, whilst leaning sideways, she crashes to the ground. Anne moves towards Gemma as she picks herself up, remounts and gets back into the race again.*

*

In the classroom, the children were seated at tables and Jackie poured drinks into red cups, whilst two boys distributed the biscuits and apple slices. When everyone had finished, two children were appointed to collect the cups, while the other children lined up by the door. Jackie led the group to the playground door and signalled to Anne that the group was ready to go out. Those who were in the playground came inside and went straight to the toilets, and then on into the classroom for drinks and biscuits. A free-play session followed

once all the cups had been cleared away, and those who had been outside returned to take part in the activities; this was much the same as had been observed before the break. With about twenty minutes of the session remaining, Anne came into the classroom and told the children to put everything away. Many of the children joined in the clearing-up exercise, but some simply wandered around or sat down on the carpet. Once everything had been cleared away, Jackie sat on a stool in front of those children who were already sitting on the carpet and called the others to join her. She read the story (The Hungry Caterpillar), holding the book up so that the children could see the pictures. The children sitting near the front of the group listened attentively, but some of those at the sides and back were staring out of the window, looking for their parents who were about to arrive. Some children were very restless; one girl was actually doing forward rolls. Towards the end of the story, parents could be seen entering the school gate and walking down the nursery path. Once she had finished reading, Jackie collected together all the craft work that had been completed that session, and held up each piece asking the children to claim ownership. Anne came to the classroom door and called children to meet their parents. Jackie dismissed the remaining children one by one as their parents arrived, whilst Anne stayed in the entrance area supervising the exodus.

The research process at Harrington: general observations

The above description represents a typical session, the pattern of activities being much the same during all the visits. On two occasions there were extra carpet sessions, one for 'Letterland', conducted by Anne and in which the older children took part, and one for music, which Jackie organised with half the class.

Staff deployment and adult/child interaction

Most noticeable were the low levels of adult/child interaction during the children's free-play time. Anne spent much time engaged in administrative work or supervising the soft play room, whilst Jackie took cookery groups or did domestic duties, such as sweeping up sand, picking dough off the floor and supervising the children while they washed their hands. The NNEB and work experience students were similarly engaged in domestic activities such as washing up and fastening children's craft aprons, or sometimes took up a static position at a puzzle table or in the book corner.

On one occasion whilst I was observing, I was the only adult in the room. A group of children were playing in the vicinity of the home corner, and one boy came up to me saying, 'Teacher! Can you wait there while we play?' I observed much rough and tumble, and several acts of aggression during my visits. Perhaps this child had learned that the presence of an adult might constrain the activities of those children who had a tendency to behave aggressively. He may also have been

demonstrating his awareness of the fact that adult presence was something to be valued, particularly in a setting in which the adults seemed to be engaged in activities other than child interaction. Anne, in expressing her commitment to independent learning, said that the nursery 'could run by itself', and did not really need her to be there. She commented, 'I can just set it up and let it happen'. However, on the positive side, the children did have the opportunity to express themselves creatively, using a variety of media, and without *adult interference*, as is illustrated in 'Artist at Work: The Making of a Masterpiece'.

During one session Anne spent some time assessing three children individually. She sat at a table in the classroom and set them a variety of tasks such as counting, matching and colour recognition. Each child then went off to construct a three dimensional model and, on returning, discussed what s/he had done. Anne photographed each model as a record for each child's portfolio. Paintings and drawings were also collected for the portfolio, and each one discussed and reflected upon.

The second part of this phase of the research took me to Catsbury Primary School.

Catsbury Nursery

In order to reach Catsbury Primary School I had to drive through the city, past a trading estate and on into a large council estate. The

houses and blocks of flats were typically sixties-styled and boxed-shaped, and were in varying condition.

I had arranged to meet the nursery teacher at 8.45am. As I approached the school, some children and parents/carers had already arrived, and were standing in the playground. The lollipop lady waved me in through the school gates, and I selected a hiding place for my car. I'd had to use the family 'banger', which was well-rusted and had a rather interesting engine sound. As I swiftly parked, trying to conceal my heap, a man (whom I later discovered to be the headteacher) waved as he passed in his BMW. Would I have any credibility?

The school building appeared to be in good condition. It was a typically sixties, flat-roofed building with large areas of glass window. A large playing field surrounded the school, offering some breathing space after driving through suffocating rows of houses. I walked into the small reception area. There were no thick carpets here. Instead, there was a small area of polished wood floor, on which were standing two small chairs and a small table bearing a potted plant. Displays of children's work covered the walls, and a sign saying, 'Welcome to Catsbury Primary School' greeted me as I walked towards the secretary's office.

Having introduced myself to the secretary, I was issued with a large security tag, a sad but necessary accessory for school visitors. I was then taken down a long corridor to the nursery. More displays of children's work covered the corridor walls. Staff dashed about, their arms filled with materials in preparation for the start of the day. We entered a doorway which led into a small corridor/cloaks area. As we

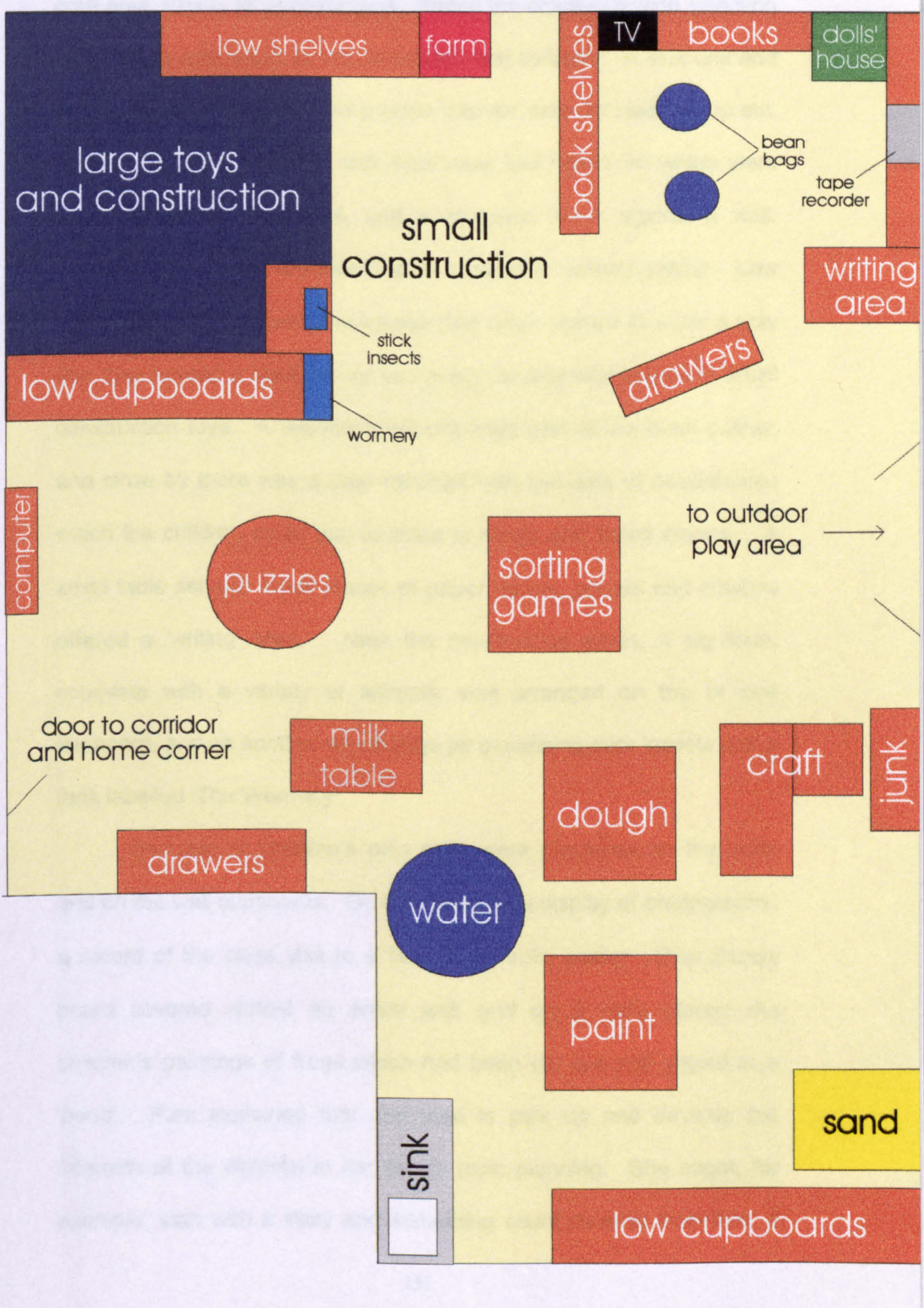
walked down this corridor, the secretary explained to me that the classroom which could be seen on our left was for the reception class. Opposite this classroom were the toilets which were shared by the children from the reception class and the nursery. One area of this corridor was set up as a home corner containing small wooden tables and chairs, a wooden cooker and fridge and a variety of 'home' equipment. Children's pencil drawn sketches of smiling faces covered the door of the nursery. We walked into the nursery and I was introduced to the nursery teacher, Pam.

Pam was in her late forties. She seemed to have a bubbly, lively personality, and dressed in what might be described as 'young styles' (leggings and baggy tops). She had dark, tightly curled hair and wore long, dangling earrings and had a very broad smile; indeed she always seemed to be smiling. Pam was married with a teenage daughter. Having trained for the infant age range, she began teaching in 1969 in an inner city school which organised classes on 'family grouping' (rising-fives to seven-year-olds). When the school was reorganised she took over the reception class. After a short break (two years) to care for her daughter as a baby (she admitted to not liking motherhood, although she loved working with young children), she returned to teach in a reception class again. The LEA began admitting an annual intake which meant that she had very young children in her class. She said that she felt unhappy about such young children being subjected to the regimes of the reception class. Pam's sister was headteacher of a nursery school in an LEA which had been able to provide in-service training and she began seeking her advice. She also started to find out what was going on in nurseries in the area. Having convinced her headteacher that what she wanted to do was right for these young children, she began implementing nursery practice in her reception class. When her husband's job moved to another city, she moved to take up a post in another reception class. She came to Catsbury when the nursery class was due to be opened and set it up herself.

The secretary left the room. Pam and I discussed the research for a few minutes; we had already talked about it in some depth during a telephone conversation. Pam then showed me around the classroom. It had originally been one of the reception classrooms, and was quite small compared to the purpose-built nurseries I had visited. However, Pam explained that she had tried to make the best use of space so that she could provide as many areas of experience as possible for the children. The home corner had been set up in the corridor in order to give the children the maximum amount of space in which to play. Having the internal door of the nursery propped open during the session allowed the children to choose to go into that area.

Figure 4.2

Floor plan of Catsbury (not to scale)



Occupying a large part of the classroom was the 'wet' area. Here there were sand and water trays, dough and painting tables and a craft area, which, as at Harrington, offered the children a wide selection of materials with which to create models and collages. A sink unit and a range of cupboards formed a small 'kitchen' area for washing up etc. Set slightly away from the wet area were two tables on which were puzzles and sorting games, and a computer stood against a wall. About a third of the classroom was covered in corded carpet. Low cupboards, shelving and bookcases had been placed in such a way that they formed a book corner and areas for play with large and small construction toys. A television set occupied part of the book corner, and close by there was a tape recorder with two sets of headphones which the children could use to listen to songs and taped stories. A small table set with small pieces of paper, forms, pencils and crayons offered a 'writing' area. Near the construction areas, a toy farm, complete with a variety of animals, was arranged on top of one cupboard, and on another was a large jar containing stick insects and a tank labelled 'The Wormery'.

Samples of children's *own* work were displayed on the walls and on the wall cupboards. On one wall was a display of photographs, a record of the class visit to a farm two weeks earlier. One display board covered almost an entire wall and on it were placed the children's paintings of frogs which had been cut out and placed in a 'pond'. Pam explained that she tried to pick up and develop the interests of the children in her termly topic planning. She might, for example, start with a story and something could develop from that, if

the children showed an interest in a particular aspect. One child had brought some tadpoles into school and all the children were fascinated by them; so she built up the term's topic around these. The frog pictures had been painted by the children, who had then decided on their position in the 'pond'. This activity had followed the release of the frogs into a pond near to the school, which all the children had witnessed.

Pam introduced me to Susan, the nursery nurse, who dashed into the classroom carrying milk cartons.

Susan was in her late twenties and was married without children. She had very long dark hair, tied back in a single plait, and wearing leggings and a baggy top. She was very softly spoken and, like Pam, always seemed to be smiling. Having trained nine years earlier (NNEB), she had done temporary work in private nurseries and in state nursery classes and reception classes. Catsbury was her first permanent post and she had been working there for a year.

Susan put the milk cartons on the top of a low cupboard and began placing a name tag on each one. A table and four chairs was set by this low cupboard. Susan explained that the children could choose when to have a drink at almost any time during the session, and then go along and sit at the table to drink it. The labels helped the children to recognise their names in print and also served to let staff know which children had had their drink.

Pam then showed me the nursery's outdoor play area, a door to which opened from the classroom. This was a large tarmac playground surrounded by wire fencing about one and a half metres high. A wooden Wendy House stood in one corner, and to one side was a rabbit hutch and run, complete with a large black and white rabbit called Peter. Two tables were set with water activities (bubbles and a plastic toy canal system). At the far end of the playground were two

tricycles and a ride-on tractor and trailer. Parents/carers and children had started to arrive, so we went back into the classroom. Pam and Susan had to make final preparations for the arrival of the children.

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THE MEETING PLACE

8.58 am. The parents/carers (some fathers, more mothers, some may be grandparents) are waiting in the playground with their children, busily chatting. Some children are holding their parents'/carers' hands; others are dashing around the playground. Pam and Susan are still preparing for the children's entry; Pam is putting out the paint pots and Susan is counting out the milk cartons. Pam opens the classroom door and parents and children walk in. Two children on the far side of the playground dash towards the door and join their mothers. As the children enter, Pam smiles and greets them. Susan goes towards the expanding group of parents and children, and one little boy shows her his Power Ranger figure; she stoops down and talks to him about it. One mother is explaining to Pam that her daughter has not been well, but has insisted on coming to nursery. Pam strokes the little girl's head, nods and smiles. Another girl pulls her mother by the hand across the room to the computer, and the two sit together, while the girl talks to her mother about the program. Two mothers are sitting with their children (boy and girl) at the puzzle table and a father is in the book corner looking at the books with his daughter. A sudden burst of laughter is heard. Susan and one mother appear to be sharing a joke; they are laughing almost uncontrollably and Susan is touching the mother's forearm.

*

The parents/carers lingered in the classroom for about 20 minutes. Gradually the group broke up and left. Pam called the children to the carpet and asked them all to sit down and close their eyes. She spoke quietly saying, 'Now you've all had a look at what there is to do today. Think about the things you would like to do. Remember, not everyone can do the same thing at the same time, and we will be able to play outside as well.' She then asked if any children would like to start working with the puzzles, and four children (3 girls and 1 boy) put up their hands. Pam told them to go and get started. Then she asked if

anyone would like to play sorting games with Tina, the NNEB student who had arrived during the parent gathering. Six children put up their hands. Pam explained that there was only room for four at the table. She closed her eyes, and waved her arm about randomly 'picking' four children. The 'chosen' four went off to work with Tina. And so this process was repeated until all the children had decided upon an activity with which to work during the session.

Once all the children were occupied, Pam walked around the classroom marking the register. Some children had decided to go into the 'home corner' in the corridor. Before doing this, they had to collect their velcro name tag from the book corner, and then register themselves as being in the home corner by placing it onto a felt board. Susan had joined the group and was being served a 'meal' by two girls.

Back in the classroom, a quiet hum of activity was evident. Two girls were playing with the farm animals, moving them in and out of the barns. Two boys were in the book corner listening to a story tape, holding a book whilst following the story. Three boys were at the sand tray, and a boy and a girl at the water tray. Several children were in the collage area creating pictures. Two girls were at the dough table making 'worms', and talking to Pam about what they were doing. Three boys were on the carpet playing with large wooden bricks.

*

SCAFFOLDING ON A BUILDING SITE

All the children have chosen something to do and are busily engaged in their activities. (I am sitting on a low cupboard next to the carpet area.) *Jonathan, David and Neil are on the carpet. They are building walls with large wooden bricks. Jonathan and Neil have made walls which are almost parallel, and the two boys start to run a tractor in*

the space between them. Pam moves towards the group and sits on the carpet amongst the bricks. She suggests to Paul that he could perhaps use his bricks to help Jonathan and Neil make a house. 'No. A garage.' suggests Neil. David and Jonathan agree, and the three boys begin to build a third wall to join the two parallel walls. Pam gets up and moves to the animal table quite near to where the boys are working. Sally and Charlotte are examining the wormery tank. Pam kneels down beside them and pulls the black paper away from the sides of the tank to reveal a maze of worm tunnels. The two girls bend down to peer inside. 'Can you find a worm?' Sally points to a worm and follows the line of its tunnel with her finger. Charlotte recoils, shuddering and smiling simultaneously. Dean and Michael join the two girls and Sally shows them the worm. Pam asks the children to look at the layers of soil and sand; 'What's happened?', she asks. 'The dirt's mixed up', answers Charlotte, as the other children thrust their heads forward to take a closer look. Neil dashes up to Pam and points to the newly erected garage, which is now occupied by the tractor. He explains that the garage now needs a roof. Pam points to a corner of the craft area in which assorted sheets of thick cardboard are stacked, and the three boys go over to try to find just the right piece.

*

Pam suddenly realised that I had not yet met the 'boss' (headteacher). As all the children were busily engaged and two adults, other than us, were in the room, we went out of the nursery to visit the headteacher in his office.

Mr Kitson was in his early fifties, with fair to greying hair and spectacles. He dressed casually in sweatshirts and sweaters, and had a jolly, approachable sort of manner, having the air of someone who would rather be on the rugby field than in school. Pam described him as being 'a bit lazy', but thought that in her case this was a bonus, since he did not 'interfere' with her work in the nursery. He had taught in first schools (5-9 year age group) and a middle school (10-14 year age group) in the authority. Having taken the usual fast-track to promotion experienced by men in primary education, he became head of a first school, and then moved to the much larger Catsbury Primary, where he had been headteacher for fifteen years.

I explained a little more about the research to him and that, if possible, I would like to interview him at some stage during the next few weeks. He agreed to be interviewed, but wanted to know a little more about the questions I would be asking. I gave him a very brief outline of the sorts of issues which might be discussed, trying not to give too much away, since I did not want him to give me prepared responses.

By the time we returned to the classroom, some children had decided it was time to have drinks, and were sitting at the table sucking

straws whilst watching the activities of the other children. I was approached by a girl who asked me if I would like a cup of tea. I followed her into the home corner where the table was set with cups, saucers and plates. She poured me a cup of 'tea' while her friend offered me 'cakes', which I obligingly 'devoured'. Having thanked the girls for their hospitality, I moved back into the classroom.

The door to the outdoor play area was now open, and several children had chosen to go outside. Those who chose to go outside went through the same registration process as was adopted for visiting the home corner. Susan was with the group, and I decided to go out to join them. I approached the exit as two girls 'registered' and started to walk towards the door. As they reached the door, one girl pushed the other so that she could go through first, causing her companion to fall against the door frame. The girl did not appear to have been hurt, but Pam had seen what had happened and approached the offender. Pam knelt down in front of the girl, confronting her face to face and saying in a stern voice, 'Leanne, we do *not* push people, because if we do we might hurt them. Don't you let me see you do that again.' Leanne stood for a moment with her finger in her mouth before going outside to join the group. I moved out to join them.

*

OPEN ALL HOURS

The sun is shining. Seven children have chosen to be outside with Susan. Jamie and Daniel are circuiting the lower area of the playground on tricycles. Janine, Rachel and Michael are busy preparing a meal in the Wendy House. Leanne and Anna are blowing bubbles at the bubble table with Susan. Susan begins to wave around a large bubble maker, releasing clusters of bubbles into the air. Leanne and Anna drop their bubble blowers and chase after the bubbles which have been caught by a warm air

current and are being carried up towards the blue sky. The girls try to burst the bubbles as they ascend away from them. Jamie and Daniel leave their tricycles and join in the chase. A bubble pops in Anna's face; she blinks furiously and wipes her eyes. The remaining bubbles are now out of reach and float away over the fence towards the main school playing field. Jonathan, David and Neil have decided to come outside to join in the bubble chase. Susan waves the bubble maker repeatedly, causing hundreds of bubbles to rise up like a celebratory balloon release. The children dash about trying to catch the bubbles. Susan calls out, 'Look at the colours. What can you see?' 'Pink. I can see pink!' shouts Leanne. 'No, green!' retorts Daniel. (I can see mauve.) *Neil is chasing some bubbles near the Wendy House. Michael jumps out and bursts a large bubble which Neil was just about to catch. Neil goes towards another bubble, but again Michael gets there first. Janine and Rachel appear from the Wendy House, wearing long dresses and high-heeled shoes, which they discard as they try to chase the bubbles. Neil turns and makes his way back to the classroom, as Julie and Sally come out to join the throng of bubble enthusiasts.*

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The session continued with children making choices, Pam and Susan circulating around the classroom, supporting and discussing what the children were doing. The NNEB student spent most of the time at the sorting games table and in domestic activities. With 30 minutes of the session left, Pam told the children to tidy the classroom. Some children needed to be encouraged to stop what they were doing, whilst others busily picked up toys, blocks, puzzles etc., placing them into their correct trays or bins. Some children collected damp cloths from the sink and began to wipe the craft tables.

Once everything had been returned to its place, the children assembled on the carpet. This time Susan took the session, while Pam sorted the children's craft work and paintings which had been completed that morning. Susan began by leading songs and rhymes, and the children clapped and did various actions with their arms and hands as they sang. She read a short story, 'The Little Goat', holding up the book and pointing to pictures as she read. The morning's craft

work and paintings were distributed by Pam as parents/carers began arriving, some standing outside and some standing just inside the nursery door. One by one the children were dismissed as their parents arrived. Once all the children had left, Pam and Susan collapsed into chairs, eating their lunch before preparing for the next session.

The research process at Catsbury: general observations

Again the above description represents a *typical* session. On one occasion the children were taken into the school hall for dance and movement to music. I observed some adult-led activities, such as that in which the children drew around farm animal templates, cut out the drawings and then stuck them onto a piece of green paper to create a picture. At another session, Susan moved the wormery to an activity table and called groups of children around her to discuss what was happening inside. So, although for much of the time children were engaged in self-directed activity, structured, adult-led activities were integrated into the programme.

Staff deployment and adult/child interaction

Throughout all the sessions Pam and Susan spent their time circulating amongst the children, talking to them to encourage them to reflect on what they were doing, and sometimes offering suggestions so that they might extend their activities. Domestic duties appeared to be equally shared between Pam and Susan. The NNEB student (present for two

sessions) and a work experience student were designated responsible for a particular table or area, and also took part in domestic activities.

Pam took responsibility for monitoring the children's progress. Each week she observed and made notes on individual children, and kept records of any achievements made. She also kept records relating to children's social, language, physical and manipulative skills, together with samples of work.

The classroom always appeared to be a hive of activity, there being a low noise level (hence I was able to hear the verbal interactions between adults and children). All the children were engaged in some activity or another, and there *appeared* to be no aimless wandering.

The last stage in this phase of my research took me to Fiddlebrooke Infants' School.

Fiddlebrooke Nursery

It was a crisp, cool, autumnal morning. I drove out of the city centre for about a mile and arrived in an area of mixed housing, some private, some council. The entrance to Fiddlebrooke Infants' School was situated at the end of a cul-de-sac of rather smart, newly-built private houses. The school shared its grounds with the junior school which was housed in a separate building, both buildings being surrounded by a large playing field. At the back of the playing field were rows of council houses with a large industrial estate sprawled out beside them.

I had arranged to meet the headteacher at 8.30am. As I drove through the school gates, a few members of staff were parking their cars, but parents and children had not yet arrived. The school building was similar to that of Harrington and Catsbury, being flat-roofed and built in the late sixties. I made my way into the school entrance hall, which, although larger than that at Catsbury, was similarly furnished and decorated. Displays of children's work adorned the walls, but a 'welcome' sign was conspicuous in its *absence*. I introduced myself to the school secretary who took me along to the headteacher's office, and introduced me to Miss Priday.

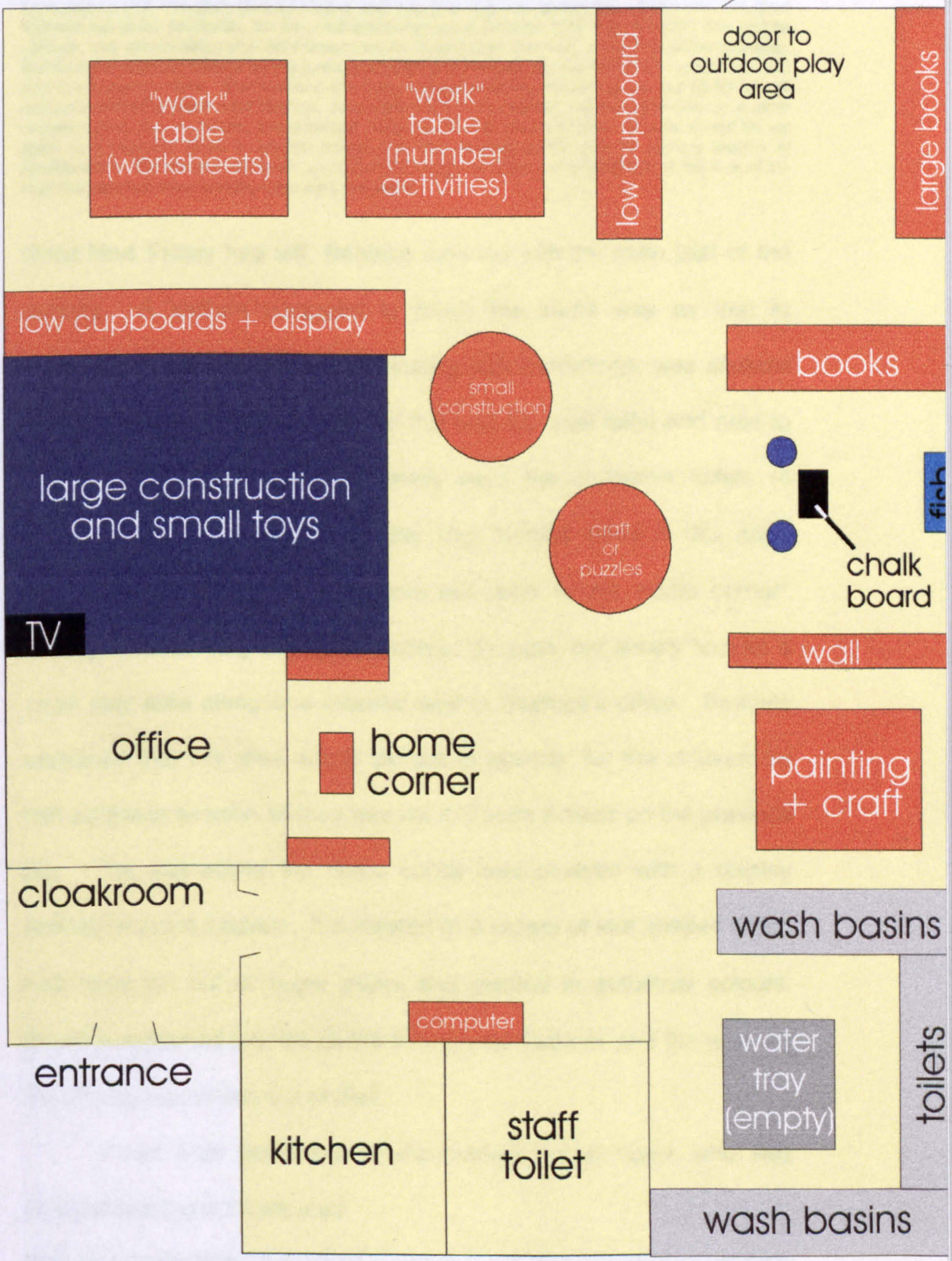
Miss Priday was in her late forties. Her streaky grey hair was short and 'permed', and she wore a dark-coloured suit. The nursery teacher described her as a 'bit of a dictator'. However, despite Miss Priday's rather formidable appearance, she did sometimes break out into a lovely warm smile. I kept feeling that she was trying to maintain a very professional front. When talking about her background experience, Miss Priday seemed keen to let me know about her academic background. She had initially trained for the 5 to 7 years age group at one of the top training colleges in the country (as it was then in the sixties), and returned there for a year in the mid-seventies to do her B.Ed.. This degree covered the 0-7 year age range and gave her her nursery qualification. During her teaching career she had taught in infant classes, apart from one year when she taught 8 year olds. She described teaching infants as her 'first love'.

We briefly discussed the research, having already talked about it on the telephone, and Miss Priday then took me out of the school building and across the playground to the nursery. She explained that the nursery building, which was separate from the school, was built as a nursery over twenty years earlier. However, as at Harrington, there had initially been insufficient funding available for it to operate as a nursery. Like Harrington and Catsbury, it had been operating as a nursery for just over five years.

Entering the door of the building we came into a cloakroom. A small noticeboard detailed school business, such as forthcoming Parent Teacher Association events. From here led a door into the

Figure 4.3

Floor plan of Fiddlebrooke (not to scale)



main classroom. Miss Priday, introduced me to the nursery teacher, Beatrice, who was working on the computer in her office.

Beatrice was in her late forties, but seemed to dress somewhat older for her age. Wearing a below the knee pleated skirt and short-sleeved blouse, she had grey hair and spectacles. Sadly she had been widowed two years previously, her late husband being some 30 years older than herself. She had no children, only step-children who were already adults (in fact older than her) at the time of her marriage. Beatrice had originally trained for the junior age range (7-11 years), but her first teaching post in 1970 was in a reception class. She said that she really enjoyed teaching this age group, but found herself being transferred to teach older children. After eight years in that school, she moved to take up another reception post, but, as before, found herself being placed with older children. So she moved on yet again to a reception class in another school and then applied for the post of nursery teacher at Fiddlebrooke. The nursery had been operational for two years when she arrived and, at the time of the interview, she had been working there for three years.

Once Miss Priday had left, Beatrice took me into the main part of the nursery. A kitchen equipped in much the same way as that at Harrington, but without the co-ordinating soft furnishings, was situated opposite Beatrice's office. Next to this was the staff toilet and next to that a semi-enclosed area in which were the children's toilets (4 cubicles) and handbasins. A water tray (empty) stood in this area. Moving further inside the classroom we came to the 'home corner'. This was not actually set up in a corner as such, but simply formed a small play area along one external wall of Beatrice's office. Beatrice explained that this area would be 'out of bounds' for the children for that particular session as they had left it in such a mess on the previous day. The wall above the home corner was covered with a display entitled 'Autumn Leaves'. It consisted of a variety of leaf shapes which had been cut out of sugar paper and painted in autumnal colours. Beatrice explained that the term's theme was 'Autumn' and the work for the display had arisen out of that.

I was then introduced to the nursery nurse, Carol, who was busily preparing the craft area.

Carol was in her mid-thirties, unmarried, but the mother of two children. Short in stature and slightly built, her shoulder-length brown hair forming a profusion of tight curls. She was dressed in leggings and a baggy top. After college, where she gained her NNEB, she was employed as a classroom assistant in a special school for children aged between five and seven years. She gave up her job for a

while after the birth of her second child and then returned to do supply work in the special school, and also worked in playgroups. She eventually went back to full-time employment and had been at Fiddlebrooke for 5 years.

Beatrice left me with Carol, while she popped back into her office to continue with her work on the computer. The craft area in which Carol was working was partitioned from the main classroom by two walls, there being low cupboards along one wall, and a row of small handbasins set against the other. Carol had prepared a table ready for the morning session on which she had placed a variety of leaves and paint sponges. She showed me around the remaining parts of the nursery.

The main area of the classroom was quite large, but not as large as Harrington. Low cupboards and bookcases were arranged to form a book corner. An area next to the book corner contained a blackboard with chalks, and an aquarium containing goldfish was positioned against a wall. More low cupboards were placed in such a way that they formed a construction/carpet area, in the corner of which was a television and video recorder. Behind this was what Carol called a 'work area' in which there were two large tables, each surrounded by six chairs. In the middle of the room were two tables, one of which was spread with Lego. The other table was set with glue and glitter and pieces of card which had been cut into different shapes. Carol explained that these materials were being provided for the children to make Christmas cards, which had been started early (November) as there was so much to do at that time of year. I left Carol at the table as she had to cut out some more angels' wings. Parents and children had started to congregate at the entrance to the nursery.

*

ALL PRESENT AND CORRECT

8.55 am. Beatrice is in her office working on the computer. She is printing out signs for the noticeboard. Carol is cutting out pieces of card for the craft table. Parents/carers (I can see only one man) *and children are standing outside the entrance to the nursery, chatting. Some children are grouped close to the doorway; others are holding their parents/carers hands. Carol goes towards the entrance door and opens it. Beatrice is still in her office. Most of the children leave their parents and walk in. Carol smiles and greets them, and helps some of them hang up their coats. Beatrice is still in her office. Two mothers enter the cloakroom and help their children take off their coats. One mother spends a few moments talking to Carol; they are both smiling. All the children who were waiting outside are now in the classroom. Beatrice is still in her office.* (When is she going to come out?) *Some children wander about the classroom looking at the activities; others are sitting on the carpet. Carol welcomes two latecomers. Beatrice comes out of her office, folds her arms and tells the children who are not already seated on the carpet to join those who are. She picks up the register and sits on a chair next to the carpet. Carol is arranging the aprons around the craft table.*

*

All the children assembled on the carpet and sat cross-legged whilst Beatrice called the register. An NNEB student arrived and went into the kitchen. Once registration had been completed, Beatrice held up a 'Letterland' book and read the rhyme of 'Eddy Elephant'. She followed this with the song 'Five Currant Buns in a Baker's Shop', which the children and Carol sang with her, holding up their fingers and pressing them down as the buns were 'sold'. Song completed, Beatrice told the children what they would be doing during the session, and explained that they would not be able to use the home corner for that session, as they had made such a mess in it during the previous session. She took up a sheet of paper on which was written a list of activities and children's names and, one by one, children were directed to a table. Some children were to work with Beatrice, making Christmas cards,

and so that group went to the correct table and sat down awaiting instructions. As a group was assigned to an activity, the adult who would lead it was given a list of children's names so that a record could be kept of which children had completed the task. One group went to work with Carol in the craft area. I moved over to see what they were doing.

*

THE OPERATION

Six children (4 girls and 2 boys) have been told to come to the craft table and are now standing around it wearing their aprons. A collection of leaves of different shapes and sizes have been placed in the middle of the table together with four trays containing sponges soaked in paint - autumnal red, yellow, brown and orange. Each child has set before her/himself a large sheet of white paper. Carol finishes tying up the back ties on the last apron. All are now ready to perform the 'operation'. Carol explains to the children that they are going to make leaf prints. All the children have their eyes on Carol, with the exception of Darren who is watching some children from the main school doing PE on the playground. Carol takes a large sycamore leaf, presses it onto a brown paint sponge, lifts it and then places it on a sheet of paper, pressing it down with the palm of her hand. (Are you watching, Darren?) *She carefully lifts the leaf to reveal its image on the paper, and tells the children that they can now make prints in the same way. Peter dives in and picks up a large leaf. He immediately places it on the nearest paint sponge (red) and hammers it with his fist. He then picks up the leaf by its stalk; this tree organ is now soaked in paint and folds in on itself. Peter stares at it incredulously. Carol rushes to Peter's aid, opens out the leaf and places her hand over his as they press it onto the paper together. Darren is twiddling his leaf in his fingers, watching the other children.* (You should have been paying attention, Darren!) *Rebecca is already making her third print. Carol moves to Carly's side to help her place her leaf on the paper, and suggests to Rebecca that she might use a colour other than orange. Jenny, having got more paint on her fingers than on her leaves, stands with her hands held up, arms bent, waiting to 'scrub up'.*

*

The NNEB student was assigned to a group of five children at work table on which there was a number matching activity. In this activity the children had to draw around a plastic shape in which there was a certain number of holes. They then had to match the number of holes

in that shape with those in another, and then draw around the second shape, working in much the same way as in a game of dominoes. Another group of children had been told to go to a work table on which were some 'Letterland' worksheets. The children were using felt-tipped pens to colour various pictures depicting 'Eddy Elephant' and a large letter 'E'. Three remaining children, one boy and two girls, were told that they could choose what they wanted to do. The boy had chosen to go into the carpet/construction area and was playing with toy cars, and the girls were at the Lego table.

The session continued in the manner described above for about one and a half hours. As children finished activities, more were summoned to tables as staff referred to their checklists. Between activities the children engaged in free play, but the amount of time they could spend in a play bout was limited, since they were continually being called to a table to work on another adult-led activity.

At 10.45am Beatrice told the children to clear away all the toys and equipment and, when finished, to sit on the carpet. The children and adults busily cleared the room. Carol went into the kitchen, while the NNEB student washed the paint trays in the craft area. Beatrice then turned on the television and started the video recorder. During the following ten minutes the children watched a video of the television programme 'You and Me'. The programme told the story of how oranges reach the fruit shop, and, once it had finished, Beatrice asked the children some questions. But the discussion was limited to three children who were sitting close to her, the remainder appearing uninterested.

The children were then sent to the toilets, being told to return to the carpet once they had washed their hands. Carol came out from the kitchen carrying a tray on which were milk cartons and biscuits, and distributed these as the children sat back down on the carpet. The children sat quietly, drinking and eating. Those children who had finished their milk and biscuits, were told to go to the book corner and select a book, which they could then quietly look through whilst waiting for the other children to finish. Once everyone had finished their milk and biscuits, Beatrice told the children to go and put on their coats so that they could go outside to play.

*

STRANGE WAYS?: THE EXERCISE YARD

Carol and Jane, the NNEB student, help the children to put on their coats, and one by one the children stride out of the cloakroom and queue by the door. Darren has put on his coat by himself but unfortunately he is wearing it upside-down. Beatrice, who is now wearing her coat and holding a mug of coffee, notices Darren's mistake and helps him to put on his coat properly. All the children are now in the queue. Beatrice tells the children that they must not go onto the grass as it is wet. She opens the door and the inmates (including me) *file outside. It is a very grey, overcast morning. Some children begin to run around in the open space of the tarmac play area; some are simply walking about aimlessly* (or so it seems to me). *Rebecca, Carly and Ian are standing still at the edge of the yard, watching the other children as they walk or run, some moving in circles, some in straight lines. Beatrice watches, drinking her coffee. Jenny and Kate are holding hands, and are jumping up and down on the spot. Peter is dashing across the yard, and Darren is chasing him, his arm outstretched as if firing a gun. Children running, wandering, standing ..... running, wandering, standing ..... running .....*

*

The children were ushered back into the classroom. They sat on the carpet, whilst Beatrice read them a story. As the story was being read,

Carol opened the nursery door and parents gathered in the area outside the kitchen. Once the story was finished, Beatrice dismissed the children, one by one, to their waiting parents.

The research process at Fiddlebrooke: general observations

As for the other two nursery classes, the description given above is a representation of a typical session. In all the sessions I observed, the children appeared to experience little autonomy in their learning, but were being directed by adults, who were under the control of the nursery teacher. Throughout the visits the adult-led activities were linked to the topic of 'Autumn', or emphasised practice in literacy and numeracy skills. The water tray was never available for the children during my visits, and the home corner was 'out of bounds' on two occasions (and also during my visit in the survey). Toys or play apparatus were not provided during any of the outdoor play sessions. Beatrice justified this regime by saying that the children had to get used to entertaining themselves as practice for playtime in the main school. The children were taken to the main school hall once each week, for PE using a variety of gymnasium apparatus. Unfortunately, I was unable to observe one of these sessions.

Staff deployment and adult/child interaction

Beatrice took major responsibility for the planning of sessions, with Carol adopting a minor role in suggesting some activities. I noticed that when children did take part in their chosen activities, they received little adult

support, since the adults were engaged at the tables for much of the time. All domestic duties were carried out by the nursery nurse and students.

Beatrice was responsible for maintaining pupil records. At the time the research took place, she was trying to develop different record keeping strategies. She had been using detailed record sheets, which Miss Priday had suggested she might adopt, but had found them too complex. As publication of the DfEE 'Desirable Outcomes' (SCAA, 1996) for pre-school education was imminent, she had decided to wait until she had seen the recommendations before finalising her methods.

My comparison of the three microsystems

In the following thematic discussion I will attempt to compare salient attributes of the microsystemic context and processes. However, I stress that any interpretations are my own and are not intended to *disempower* the reader.

Organising interviews: openness to research?

At this point it seems appropriate to compare the degree of *openness to research* which the classes seemed to exhibit. This may have had an impact on the research process, and hence on both participants' expressed perceptions *and* my interpretations.

I discussed the difficulties I had in gaining access to a class which was not open to parents in Chapter Two. However, I also experienced problems with the organisation of interviews at Fiddlebrooke. At

Harrington and Catsbury parents were invited for interview as a result of collaboration between myself and the nursery teacher. Also, I was allowed to choose the area in the classroom for conducting the children's interviews.

I hoped to adopt the same procedure for organising the interviews at Fiddlebrooke. But, having discussed the selection of parents with Beatrice, she told me that my letter could not be sent out to parents until the headteacher had authorised it. When I returned a few days later, Beatrice told me that Miss Priday was not happy about parents being *invited* for interview. Therefore, she had put up a notice in the cloakroom asking parents to volunteer to join focus groups on the days I had suggested. However, Beatrice said she had approached some parents whom she thought *most likely* to take part, and had encouraged them to 'sign up'. I felt rather disappointed and disgruntled at this news. The groups at Fiddlebrooke would not 'match' my carefully selected sample of parents at Catsbury and Harrington. All those who 'signed up' were *'middle-class'* by my classification. I began to resign myself to the fact that I would have to conduct focus group interviews which I thought were going to be a waste of my time. But I was adopting a positivist's stance, and was soon to realise that the fact that I was not allowed to select parents for interview was actually part of my data. I was pleased I had come to Fiddlebrooke.

A similar situation occurred with regard to interviewing the children. I was not allowed to choose an area to conduct the interviews, but was told by Beatrice to use a table in a corner of the 'work area' which was not easily accessible to the children. I have to admit to feeling rather uncomfortable at Fiddlebrooke.

Facilities and resources

As might be evident from the descriptive accounts of the three nursery classes, Harrington had the best facilities and resources. Whilst Fiddlebrooke also had a purpose-built classroom, Harrington had three times the amount of space. Partly due to this greater size, more activities were available for the children at Harrington than in the other classes. Quite how Harrington had managed to provide so much equipment in the classroom is open to speculation. Since the LEA primary inspector had taught at the school, and was a personal friend of the nursery teacher, the school may have received 'favourable' funding. Another possibility could have been reorganisation of the school budget due to pressure from competition with other schools in the area. Whereas Fiddlebrooke and Catsbury were full to capacity, Harrington was not. There were two other schools, situated a short distance from Harrington, to which parents could send their children. But these schools did not have a nursery class. The rather luxurious decor and well-equipped nursery classroom at Harrington may have served to entice prospective 'customers'. Parents opting to send their children to Harrington Nursery might send them on

into the main school, hence increasing numbers on role. Such reallocation of funding away from other areas of the school, in order to produce a 'corporate image', has been highlighted as an increasingly common practice resulting from market forces in education (Ball, 1993). Certainly, at Harrington, the luxurious decor and high level of resourcing were not obvious in other parts of the school I visited.

Of the three nursery classes, Catsbury had the smallest classroom and the fewest facilities. But interestingly, although space was limited, a greater variety of activities was available for the children at Catsbury than at Fiddlebrooke.

Staff training, experience and relationships

Anne was the only nursery teacher who had received initial training in teaching the pre-school age group, albeit some time ago. Pam, whilst being initially trained for the five to seven years age group, had had much experience of teaching four-year-olds in reception classes. She could also be considered as having been 'informally trained' through the input she had received, and still was receiving, from her sister who was a nursery school headteacher. Beatrice was the least qualified of the three teachers, having been trained to teach the junior age range, and having spent much of her teaching career working with this age group. None of the teachers had received significant in-service training in nursery education.

The nursery nurses were qualified with NNEB certificates and had had a variety of background working experiences in pre-school education.

Both Jackie and Susan had worked in private nurseries and state schools, whereas Carol (Fiddlebrooke) had worked in special schools and playgroups. The headteachers also had different background experiences. Miss Priday and Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe had had more experience of teaching young children than Mr Kitson, who had always worked with children in the junior age range and upwards.

Interestingly, there were differences in the working relationships of the nursery nurses and nursery teachers in the three settings. Whilst they all collaborated to some extent in the planning of activities and assessment of the children, there were differences in the allocation of domestic duties. At Harrington, Jackie (nursery nurse) was responsible for most domestic tasks, but was able to delegate these to students. A similar situation was apparent at Fiddlebrooke. At Catsbury, however, there appeared to be a greater sharing of responsibilities, with both Susan and Pam working with the children and carrying out domestic tasks. There were also differences in the relationships between the headteachers and nursery teachers which might have implications for characteristics of the microsystem, and is an issue discussed in depth in Chapter Eight.

Openness to parents

My impressions of the relationships between staff and parents are represented in the 'video clips' entitled 'Checking In', 'The Meeting Place' and 'All Present and Correct'. These textual images form records of what I saw, but are also typical of my impressions throughout all the

visits; Anne (Harrington) always sat at the table and chatted to parents, Pam and Susan (Catsbury) mingled with a large group of parents, and Carol (Fiddlebrooke) always greeted parents at the door of the nursery, whilst Beatrice, more often than not, was otherwise engaged. The warm, relaxed interactions between staff and parents apparent at Catsbury were not observed at Fiddlebrooke.

The amount of written information given to parents before their children started attending nursery class was different in the three schools. Fiddlebrooke provided none. Parents were given the main school booklet which contained information on school meals, school rules etc. However, I was not offered a copy of the document. Conversely, both Harrington and Catsbury provided booklets for parents specifically relating to the nursery class. Harrington's booklet provided general information on clothing, use of toilets, illness etc. The booklet encouraged parents to borrow books from the nursery to share with their children at home. Catsbury's booklet, besides giving general 'domestic' details, provided information under the following headings: Nursery Aims; Ways in Which Parents Can Help; Looking After Things; Getting on Together. Parents were encouraged to help in the classroom and to borrow books to share with their children at home. In contrast, Fiddlebrooke's parents were not invited to borrow books; in fact Beatrice said that Miss Priday was opposed to the idea.

The style of teaching and learning

The teachers at both Harrington and Catsbury generally employed 'invisible' pedagogies (Bernstein, 1977, p.511). At Harrington there was no planned curriculum. Staff seemed to rely on the great variety of equipment in the classroom as the vehicle for learning; this was also apparent in the playground as illustrated in 'Le Mans'. Such a stance might be interpreted within a Piagetian constructivist framework, in which the child is a self-motivated learner and works as a *lone* constructor of knowledge (Ebbeck, 1996). Singer (1996) points out that in this form of child-centred pedagogy the children play 'freely' and 'spontaneously', whereas the teachers 'exercise as much indirect influence as possible' (p.33). But at Harrington, whilst those children who were able to direct their 'creative energy' (Prentice, 1994, p.29), as indicated in 'Artist at Work: The Making of a Masterpiece', were permitted to do so, I observed many children wandering from one activity to another, *appearing* to achieve little. Although there were adult-led activities, these were whole or half-class carpet sessions in which there was little opportunity for individual adult support or interaction. Cookery activities provided individual attention, but each child took part in these only twice each term. However, opportunities for children to reflect on what they had been doing in the nursery were offered during the assessment process.

A child-centred pedagogy was also employed at Catsbury, but this took place within a structured curriculum. Whilst a topic was chosen by staff, this did not form a rigid framework for the children's learning. As children's interests were roused, these were picked up, followed and developed. Children had the opportunity to engage in creative activities and were observed behaving in much the same way as Mark at Harrington in 'Artist at Work: The Making of a Masterpiece'. But 'Scaffolding on a Building Site' highlights ways in which children were supported in their activities and how peer co-operation was encouraged. 'Open All Hours' also illustrates adult support. Pedagogy involving such adult support and co-operative learning might be considered congruent with a Vygotskian social-constructivist perspective. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Vygotsky (1983) highlights the importance of the role of adults and peers in extending children's 'zone of proximal development' (p.268), this being the cognitive limit within which an individual operates. Adult assistance has been shown to improve task persistence in pre-schoolers (Krantz and Scarth, 1979). Further, adult support provides 'scaffolding' for children's learning by offering 'a vicarious consciousness' (Bruner, 1986, p.76) until a child is able to master activities alone. Whilst the children at Catsbury received much adult support and some direction, they were also granted autonomy in their activities, as indicated in 'Open All Hours'. Interestingly, Catsbury was the only nursery class which had

a written policy outlining aims and objectives for the provision of nursery education.

Compared to Catsbury and Harrington, Fiddlebrooke operated a highly structured curriculum which emphasised literacy and numeracy skills, there being little movement away from the adult-imposed topic. Whilst I observed high levels of adult interaction, the approach was didactic, with adults instructing the children. Aspects of this style of pedagogy might be considered to be infused with Vygotskian principles, since Vygotsky viewed intelligence as the ability to learn from instruction (Ebbeck, 1996). But the importance of children's play and self-direction, emphasised by Vygotsky (1967), seemed to be suppressed at Fiddlebrooke. Adult-prescribed goals had to be achieved before children could engage in play activities. That the home corner was small (and was 'out of bounds' on several occasions), the water tray was unavailable and a sand tray absent, imposed restrictions on the play opportunities children could experience. The adult-led craft activity illustrated in 'The Operation', might be typical of that seen in any nursery class. However, this was the only type of craft activity which the children experienced; they were given none of the opportunities for self-expression available to children at Catsbury and Harrington. The children were not autonomous learners, and instead might be conceived as being '"receptacles" to be "filled" by the teacher' (Freire, 1972, p.58). And yet 'Strange Ways: The

Exercise Yard' illustrates a seemingly paradoxical situation in which the children were expected to be self-motivated and entertain themselves.

Moving On

The purpose of this chapter has been to 'set the scene' for the following chapters, and provide descriptions of the contexts in which perceptions of nursery education might be interpreted. I ask the reader to keep in mind these 'scenes' as we move on to 'hear' what participants within the different settings had to say about nursery education. Perhaps the reader might be helped by considering the derivation of the pseudonyms I gave to the three settings:

Harrington - comparable to Harrods.

Catsbury - the nursery teacher circulated the classroom, rather like a she cat licking her kittens.

Fiddlebrooke - was a fiddle to get into.

Part Three: Talking About Nursery Education

Chapter Five

Staff Talking About Nursery Education

Introduction

In this chapter I will *report* staff perceptions of nursery education, structuring this discussion thematically, offering *my own* interpretations, whilst the reader might like to make her/his own. Firstly, I will indicate some of the relevant literature. Then I will briefly describe the interviewing procedures in order to put voices within the context of the research process. I will then give a general overview of staff perceptions within each theme and also discuss themes within the context of the *roles* which staff adopt (e.g. headteachers perceptions are grouped together), since these are highlighted as important influences on development of perceptions in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1992). Lastly, I offer a summative discussion.

Background

Many reports exist in the literature detailing staff opinions relating to aspects of pre-school education such as children's behaviour (McGuire and Richman, 1989; Campbell and Ewing, 1990), children's adjustment to nursery class (Davies, 1991; Davies and Brember, 1991), the curriculum (Horgan and Douglas, 1995; Holligan, 1995) and attitudes towards parental involvement (Tizard et al., 1981; Gipps, 1982a; Hughes et al., 1991) and towards ethnic minority children (Ogilvy et al., 1990). There are few studies in which staff perceptions of nursery education per se have been sought. Day nursery staff perceptions of their aims are indicated in research by Richman and McGuire (1988) and Vernon and Smith (1994), but the carer, rather than the teacher role is emphasised by staff in these institutions.

Interviewing staff about nursery education

As mentioned in Chapter Two, I aimed to empower my participants in the research process, but with the staff the need to do this varied with their different roles.

The nursery teachers and I became collaborators in the research process. Together we discussed the selection of parents for interview and organised the interview locations. Therefore, power relations within the interview situation were equal. We talked as if friends and professional colleagues.

I took care that the nursery nurses did not slip into a subordinate role due to their hierarchical position in the school. I did not have as many opportunities to interact informally with the nursery nurses as with the nursery teachers. All the nursery nurses were hesitant and appeared lacking in confidence at the start of the interview, spending much time looking up at the ceiling whilst carefully considering what to say. I tried to make the situation as relaxed as possible by not taking on an expert's pose (Wainwright, 1985), and the conversations did open up, but I still had the impression that the nursery nurses felt that they were being 'tested'.

Interviews with headteachers were very different since I felt that I had to make myself at least *appear* authoritative. The headteachers confidently espoused their opinions, as I tried to maintain a level playing field.

At Harrington, Anne and Jackie were interviewed individually in Anne's office. These interviews took place during the session, whilst the children were in the classroom. I interviewed Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe in her office.

* * *

> She seems rather agitated - cheerful, but not her normal, relaxed self. She's sitting on the edge of her seat leaning over her desk towards me. I ask the first question - about her background experience. She sits back in her chair, more relaxed now, and begins her reminiscence. She has a lot to say .... and more .... she's still talking. We move to the next question. She lunges forward across the desk as she speaks. As we move on, her answers are now comparatively short. She

seems agitated again. Have I said something wrong? She does not enlarge on her answers to the extent that Anne, the nursery teacher, did. Is it the presence of the tape recorder which is affecting her behaviour? Or is it the events of the previous day (school break-in)? Perhaps she does not want to be interviewed. There is a tap at the door; a school governor has arrived to talk about the break-in. We have just about finished the interview, so I make a humble departure.

* * *

At Catsbury, Pam and Susan were interviewed, on separate occasions, during their lunchbreak. This situation perhaps indicates the importance which they placed on being involved in the activities with the children. Due to the style of teaching and learning operating in the classroom, there simply was not time for interviews to be conducted during the session. I interviewed Mr Kitson (headteacher) in his office during morning break.

* * *

Mr Kitson is sitting in an executive chair, and I'm sitting on a 'footstool'. He is leaning right back in his chair, legs crossed, and both hands clasped around a mug of coffee. I begin asking questions. He swings back and forth in his chair, staring up to the ceiling as he speaks. His answers are very elaborate. He seems to have read the right books, including the Ofsted criteria for quality in pre-school education. I'm trying to be an expert. He keeps saying 'As you well know ..' Do I?

* * *

At Fiddlebrooke, Beatrice and Carol were interviewed individually in the nursery office during a session while the children were in the classroom watching a video or listening to a story. I arranged to interview Miss Priday during the fourth visit.

* * *

I've arrived at Miss Priday's office. I gently knock on the door - no reply. I knock again - still no reply. I make my way to the secretary's office. Miss Priday is there sorting through some papers. She tells me that the secretary is on sick leave and that she may not be back for several weeks. I will have to do the interview there. I plug in the tape recorder. I feel very uncomfortable. I feel I can't sit down in the only chair in the room. We are both standing. I start the interview, but I feel such a nuisance. She is still sorting though papers as she talks.

* * *

Whilst considering empowering my participants, perhaps I should have put some thought into empowering *myself* at certain points in the research process.

Staff talking about their perceptions of the purposes of nursery education

Of the few reports regarding staff perceptions of nursery education, Blatchford et al's (1982) exploration of children's entry into nursery class gives details of staff 'reasons for desiring pre-school attendance' (p.48) for children. Staff from nursery classes (N=171) in seven LEAs completed questionnaires, part of which asked them to rate several items

regarding reasons for attending nursery class according to their perceived importance. Of the fifteen items on the questionnaire *'enabling children to talk and listen and develop intellectual skills'* was ranked highest followed *by 'enabling children to learn through play'* and *'enabling a child to contact other children'*. However, I challenge the construct validity of a questionnaire such as the one used in Blatchford et al.'s (1982) study. The items on the questionnaire were derived via the adaptation of a 'reasons grid' which had been utilised in another study concerned with parents' opinions of playgroups. Therefore the staff were not offering their own opinions, simply rating the constructs of the researchers. The effect of using such a questionnaire is to limit the frame within which opinion can be expressed.

Two recent studies (Ebbeck, 1995; Ebbeck and Zhen Goa, 1996) sought pre-school teachers' perceptions of the purposes of pre-schools in Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China. In both studies 100 pre-school teachers were interviewed and asked to indicate their perceptions of the purposes of nursery education. Children's *socialisation*, *preparation for school* and *allowing mothers to work* (in that order) were the purposes of pre-school most frequently mentioned by teachers in Hong Kong, whilst teachers in the People's Republic of China stressed *preparation for school*, *children's socialisation* and *fostering children's independence*. However, whilst these recent studies perhaps offer some insight into pre-school teachers' opinions, the very different cultural

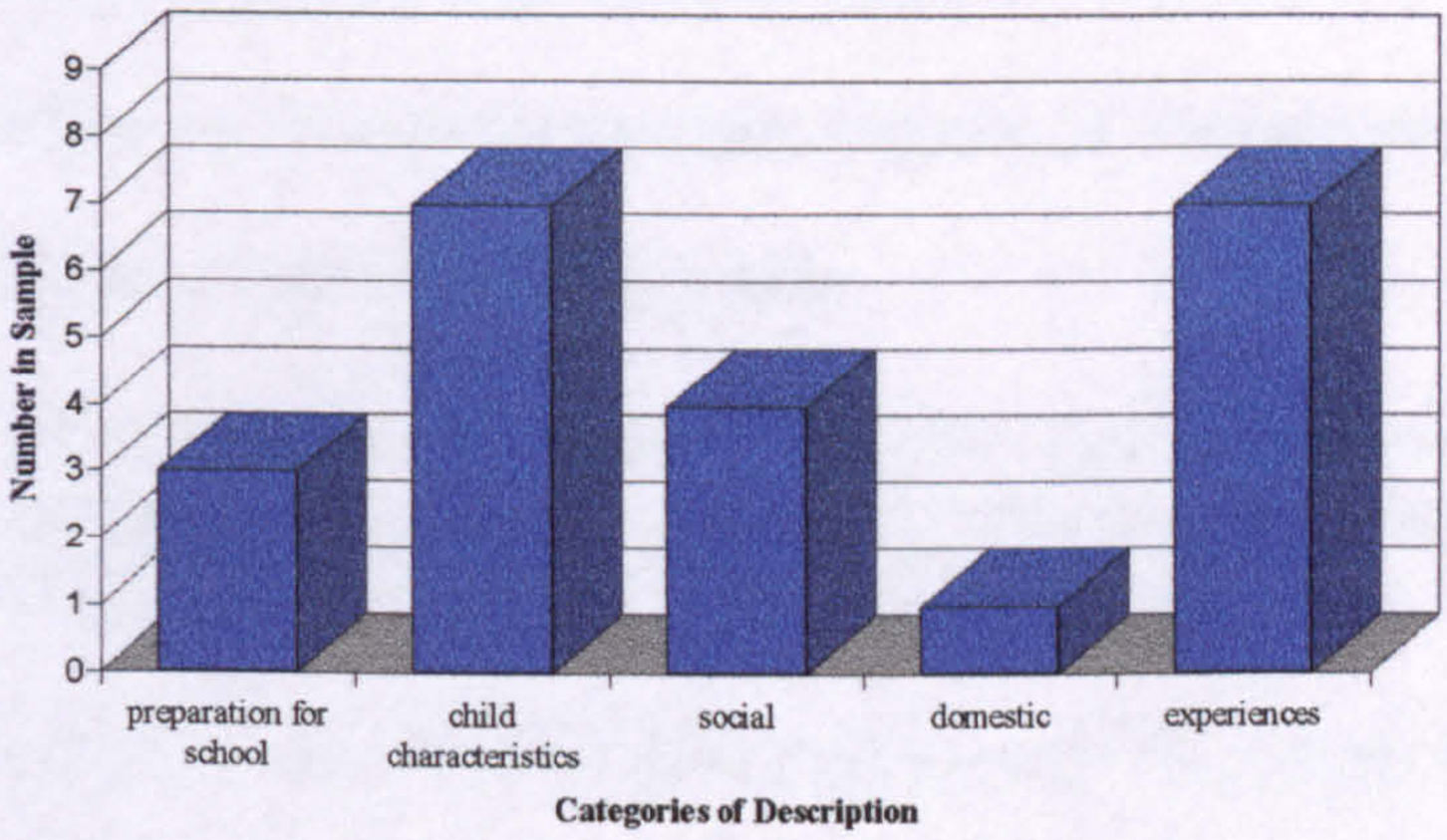
context (macrosystem) in which the perceptions have developed compared to the UK must be taken into account when considering the findings. Such cultural differences in perceptions of pre-school education were illustrated in a study conducted in three countries - North America, China and Japan (Tobin, et al., 1989). Teachers, other childcare professionals and parents were shown video recordings of activities in pre-schools in the three countries. Chinese participants felt that the American and Japanese pre-schools, although well-equipped, were too informal, and they were concerned that the children would be spoiled. Conversely, American and Japanese participants felt that the Chinese pre-school was too regimented.

Returning to my study, as a result of my analysis I created five categories of description which related to staff perceptions of the purposes of nursery education. However, I did not arrange the categories of description into a hierarchy since this was impossible; there is no right answer. The categories of description are:-

- preparation for school - routine and emotional preparation;
- effects on child characteristics - e.g. independence, self-esteem;
- social - interacting with other children and adults;
- domestic - give parents a break;
- experiences - offering children a wide variety of learning experiences.

Figure 5.1 illustrates the number of staff making comments within each category of description.

Figure 5.1: Categories of Description Relating to Staff Perceptions of the Purposes of Nursery Education



Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe, Mr Kitson and Miss Priday - The Headteachers

Two headteachers told me that offering a wide *variety of experiences* which might not, or cannot, be provided at home was one purpose of nursery education. One explained that the nursery class should provide an opportunity for play in different activity areas and help children practise skills:

> *It's lovely to see them in the sand and the water, and choosing where they're going to go. They can come in the morning and have a hammer and a bounce on the apparatus* [in the soft-play room]. *It is to give them all the experiences they need.* (Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe - Harrington)

The other stressed her beliefs in the *compensatory* aspects of nursery education, commenting:

> *Sadly, many children do not have that* [good homes] *.... so we provide a secure environment where children can learn.* (Miss Priday - Fiddlebrooke)

Miss Priday also mentioned the effect nursery experience should have in building children's self-esteem and confidence.

Mr Kitson (Catsbury) saw the purpose of nursery education as being for the development of social skills:

> *It's the movement away from the very egocentric thought ... accepting the fact that other children have needs and feelings in the same way as they do.*

Both Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe (Harrington) and Mr Kitson (Catsbury) generalised their comments regarding the purposes of nursery education to all children. Conversely, Miss Priday (Fiddlebrooke) emphasised children's inadequate home backgrounds, and how the negative effects of these might be reduced through nursery education. Was she making assumptions about the families using her own school which was situated in an Educational Priority Area? The headteachers of Harrington and Catsbury did not admit to a belief that they were trying to compensate for poor home backgrounds; but their schools were also in EPAs. The LEA implicitly drew on notions of providing compensatory education, since nursery classes had only been provided in such catchment areas. The three headteachers had been trained in the sixties and seventies when the belief in the compensating effects of nursery education for 'disadvantaged' children was prominent (Clark, 1988). However, more recently research has shown that nursery education is beneficial to *all* children (Jowett and Sylva, 1986; National Commission on Education, 1993).

Anne, Pam and Beatrice - The Nursery Teachers

The nursery teachers concentrated on the development of certain attributes within the child as being one purpose of nursery education. Pam (Catsbury) talked of enhancing children's self-esteem, explaining:

> *We want children to value themselves by valuing them, and to encourage them to value each other and respect each other.*

Anne (Harrington) stressed the purpose of nursery education was to encourage children's independence, saying:

> *I think to enable the children to become independent, to want to learn, to be inquisitive. It is becoming self-sufficient individuals, and I think if they are self-sufficient individuals they will want to learn.*

My observation of the style of teaching and learning operated by Anne seemed consistent with her statement. The children were left very much to their own devices.

Developing children's *language skills* was mentioned by Beatrice of Fiddlebrooke, as was *giving* children the motivation to learn. Interestingly, Pam's (Catsbury) view regarding children's motivation was different:

> *It's very important to **use** the motivation which is in most children **when they come to us**, and to keep that up and running by involving the children, **totally** involving the children in what they're doing and what they're learning.*

All three talked of the *variety of experiences* which nursery education should offer young children. This conception had recently been

put forward by Ofsted (Ofsted, 1994) as being one of the criteria it would use for assessing good nursery education. Perhaps this macrosystem feature had influenced these teachers' perceptions at this time, or at least brought such an idea to the forefront of their thinking. But Beatrice (Fiddlebrooke), expanded on this notion, stressing the compensatory nature of nursery education, in the same way as her headteacher, Miss Priday, had done.

> *I mean ours are 4 years old when we get them .... most of them are ready for more than they're getting at home, in most homes ... and I'm not saying that, you know .... there are plenty of homes where children are getting sufficient stimulation and interest and what have you, but I think the majority, especially in an area such as this, are not.*

Like Miss Priday, Beatrice was expressing her low expectations of the 'majority' of parents of the children in her charge. Beatrice may have been influenced by her headteacher's attitudes towards the parents. In which case exosystem interactions (Miss Priday's background experience) may have been affecting her perceptions. However, I suggest the influential aspect was the fact that Beatrice had taught in middle-class areas before arriving at Fiddlebrooke.

Jackie, Susan and Carol - The Nursery Nurses

All the nursery nurses stressed *preparation for school* as being a purpose of nursery education, emphasising the emotional adjustment the child needs to make on starting school.

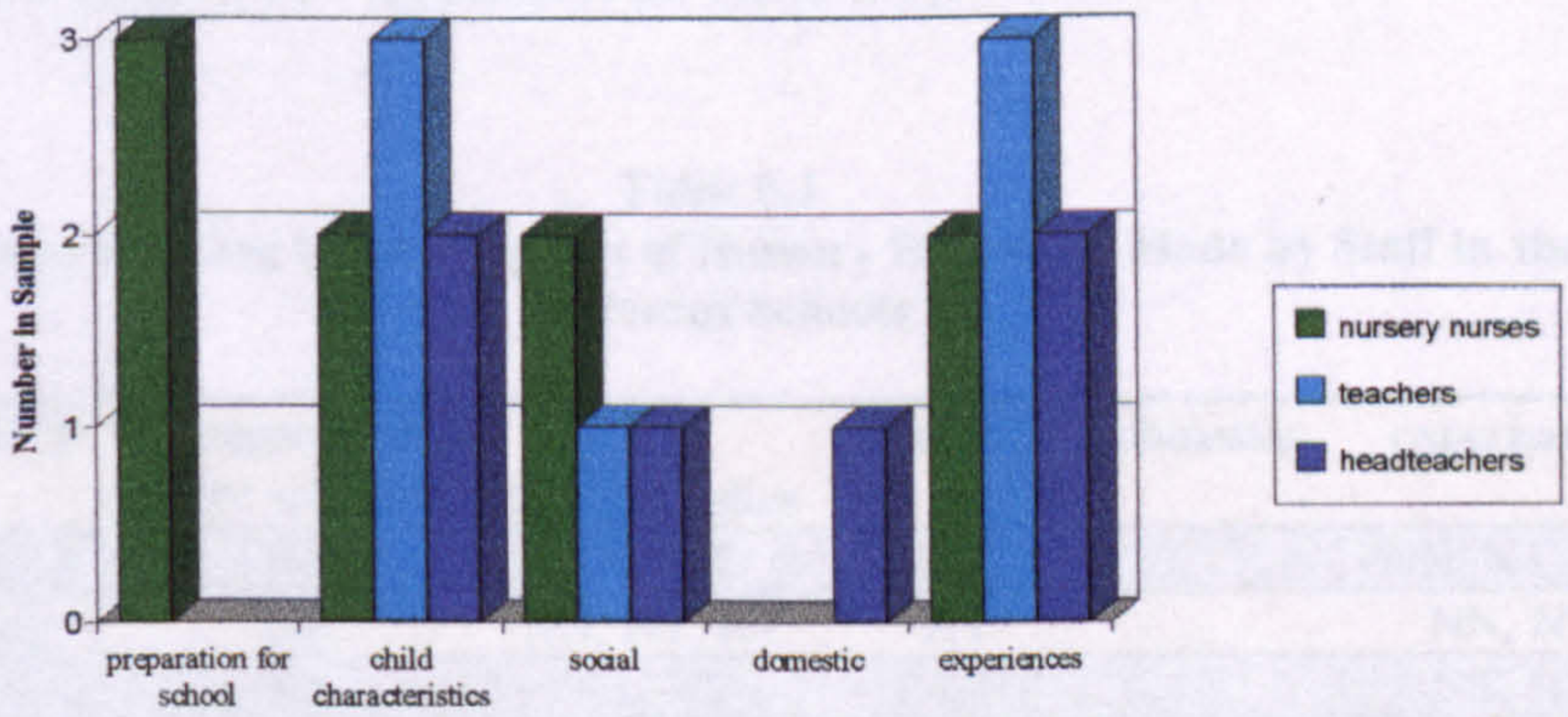
> *I think it gives them experience before they go up into school ... getting used to being separated from their parents.* (Jackie, Harrington)

Susan (Catsbury) suggested that nursery education should provide a '*secure and happy environment*' in which this preparation for school can take place, and Carol (Fiddlebrooke) emphasised a '*stimulating, caring*' environment in which a child can start adjusting to school.

Comparison of the three staff groups' perceptions of the purposes of nursery education

So that I might explore differences and similarities in the responses made by staff in each group, I constructed a bar graph (Figure 5.2) which illustrates the number of staff who made responses in the different categories of description.

Figure 5.2: Number of Staff Making Responses Within the Different Categories of Description Relating to Perceptions of the Purposes of Nursery Education.



Only the nursery nurses mentioned *preparation for school* as being a purpose of nursery education. Did headteachers and nursery teachers consider preparation for school as such an obvious and assumed purpose of nursery education, that it was not foremost in their minds, or not

worthy of mention? The nursery nurses had had training and experience in other forms of pre-school education. Therefore, a nursery class attached to a primary school may possess salient features associated with preparation for school, which are not present in other pre-school settings. Hence, the nursery nurses are more likely to have had their awareness raised regarding such a purpose, whilst other staff may have habituated to this factor.

Only one staff member (Miss Priday, Fiddlebrooke) mentioned a *domestic* reason as being a purpose of nursery education, saying:

> *If a family has a particularly difficult child,*
> *then it gives the family a breathing space.*

To give an overall picture of the responses made within the different schools, I constructed a matrix (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1
Responses Relating to the Purposes of Nursery Education Made by Staff in the Different Schools

SCHOOLS	preparation for school	child characteristics	social	domestic	experiences
Harrington	NN	NN, NT	NN		NN, NT, HT
Catsbury	NN	NN, NT, HT	HT		NN, NT
Fiddlebrooke	NN	NT, HT	NN, NT	HT	NT, HT

NN = nursery nurse NT = nursery teacher HT = headteacher

The staff at Harrington were in total agreement on one purpose of nursery education - that it should provide children with a wide *variety of experiences*. At Catsbury all staff mentioned the fostering of children's *confidence* and *self-esteem*. There was no total agreement on any one purpose of nursery education amongst the staff at Fiddlebrooke. Perhaps

poor communication between staff at Fiddlebrooke had caused this lack of agreement. The issue of staff relationships is discussed in Chapter Eight.

Staff members' *own* aims in nursery education

I asked the staff what they felt were their *own* particular aims in providing nursery education. In asking this question I hoped to perhaps explore any relationship between these aims and their different roles within the school.

The headteachers

Headteachers stressed that their aims were to do with the emotional well-being of the children.

> *Happiness is the first one, and once they're in, let them feel secure, and have an established routine.* (Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe - Harrington)

> *To have happy children, because happy children will learn a lot better than sad, worried children.* (Miss Priday - Fiddlebrooke)

However, Miss Priday went on say:

> *We can keep an eye on their physical development ... um ... we can keep an eye on any children who might be at risk.*

Of course, these latter aspects are very important, but is Miss Priday again drawing on negative attitudes towards the parents?

Mr Kitson (Catsbury) was concerned to bridge the gap between home and school, so that children were able to adjust emotionally. Providing a nursery class helped to facilitate this process. He explained:

Starting school at five years of age used to be quite a traumatic experience. We often had children who took half a term or longer to settle into the business of starting school for a full day. When our children now start school proper as rising-fives, they are very, very used to being in the building and surrounded by other children.

So then these headteachers all saw their own aims in providing nursery education as being to give young children a happy, secure start to their school lives.

The nursery teachers

Both Anne (Harrington) and Beatrice (Fiddlebrooke) stressed the provision of a *stimulating environment* as being one of their aims. Having commented that she thought the main purpose of nursery education was for children to become self-sufficient learners, Anne said that her personal aim was to provide the facilities to allow this to happen, saying:

> *I think it's very important to get the physical set up correct, and the rest will follow. I think the environment of a nursery is a number one criterion. I think if you get your environment correct, the rest will follow.*

My observations had, to some extent, corroborated what Anne was saying here. The nursery class at Harrington was extremely well equipped and beautifully decorated, but interaction between children and adults was limited. Staff spent much time in keeping the 'physical set up correct' by tidying and clearing up. Anne continued:

> *You should open the door of the nursery and the children should want to go in. They should walk in*

and go 'Ah!' and feel welcome, and I think this is my number one aim.

I cast the reader's mind back to my impressions of Harrington given in Chapter Four.

Beatrice (Fiddlebrooke), besides providing a stimulating environment, hoped the children would learn *social skills*, such as sharing and waiting their turn. She hoped those children who had speech problems and language difficulties would:

....at least have started to iron them out. I think perhaps the social and language areas are to be the most important, and those are the ones which I would hope to develop most fully.

Here I detect a different role emphasis when comparing this comment with those made by Anne (Harrington). By saying *'I would hope to develop'* Beatrice may be putting herself in the role of instructor. She is the one who is going to develop skills within the child. Contrast this with Anne's perceived role as being one in which the child is responsible for learning skills; she just provides the means.

Pam (Catsbury) put forward yet another perspective, emphasising her role as a facilitator for learning. Like Anne (Harrington) she emphasised child-centredness, but included herself in the learning process. She explained:

Giving children control over what they are doing so that I become the enabler, and the child is the one who is doing it, not me saying, 'This is what you should be doing' ... but encourage and motivate and enable children to maybe take the next step.

My observations of the style of teaching and learning operating in Pam's class were confirmed by her comments. Whilst the children were making decisions about what they were doing, they were receiving much *adult support* (see 'Scaffolding on a Building Site', Chapter Four). Contrast this with Anne's (Harrington) philosophy in which children are '*self-sufficient*' learners.

Pam continued, saying that she also aimed to try to be a good role model.

> *You really do have to show them, socially and emotionally what is possible, because one of the few things you won't tolerate is aggression ... if something makes you cross then it's perfectly okay to say that, but you don't act in an aggressive manner.*

Certainly, from my observations, there seemed to be no aggressive acts being perpetrated amongst the children in her class, either inside the classroom, or outside on the play area.

The nursery nurses

When it came to discussing their personal aims, the nursery nurses emphasised their roles as carers. They spoke of ensuring children's emotional well-being. Carol (Fiddlebrooke) put forward her perspective:

> *My main aim is to make sure a child is happy and relaxed and enjoying their time in nursery.*
> (Carol, Fiddlebrooke)

> .... *keeping an interesting, happy environment*
> ... *a relaxed environment.* (Jackie, Harrington)

Susan (Catsbury) hoped children could come to her with any problems and they could feel that:

.... they can come back in the morning thinking
that they're going to have another nice day.

She also stressed the need for children to feel safe, thoughts which echo Pam's (her colleague) ideas regarding the intolerance of aggression within the nursery.

Research by Moyles and Suschitsky (1994) indicated that nursery teachers and nursery nurses perceived little difference in their roles within the classroom. However, their study employed a questionnaire which would have limited the frame of responses. Using open-ended questions in interviews in my study gave staff the opportunity to express their perceptions of their own aims. Staff's own aims in nursery education are closely interwoven with their roles within the nursery class - the headteacher as provider and overseer; the nursery teacher as educator; the nursery nurse as carer. So characteristics of the microsystem, in which roles and hierarchical relationships are defined, seem to impact upon staff's perceptions of their aims.

Staff perceptions of their aims in other types of catchment areas

I included a hypothetical question relating to staff perceptions of their aims in other catchment areas since during informal interviews in the survey, some staff demonstrated negative attitudes towards parents and children from lower socio-economic groups. I wanted to explore such attitudes (a macrosystem interaction) further within the three nursery

classes, but felt that I could not simply ask a direct question regarding their opinions on lower socio-economic groups. By asking staff if their aims would be any different in a different type of catchment area, I was indirectly seeking their opinion on disparate groups. I wanted to explore any relationship between staff responses to this question and the general openness of their nursery classes to parents and the style of teaching and learning which was operating.

The headteachers

When asked if their aims and objectives would be any different in catchment areas which had a different type of population, both Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe (Harrington) and Mr Kitson (Catsbury) said that their aims would be the same. Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe explained:

> *No, I would look to see what the child needs every time. I would still make sure the atmosphere was happy and welcoming, no matter where I was.*

But Miss Priday (Fiddlebrooke) said she felt differences in parental expectation might impinge upon what was happening in the nursery, saying:

> *I would imagine that in a more advantaged area you would get more pressure for children to be actually doing and learning something.*

She went on to say that her aim would be to try to resist pressure from parents. Did she assume that the parents in her school were not interested in their children's achievements because they did not put the staff under

pressure? However, she explained that she did have expectations of the children in the nursery class.

> *We do have expectations of certain things we want children to achieve.*

But I cannot help wondering whether these expectations were as high as they would be in a more middle-class area.

The nursery teachers

Beatrice (Fiddlebrooke) reiterated her headteacher's comments about differences in aims and objectives in different types of catchment areas.

> *In other areas, perhaps, they would come with more social skills, better language development, in which case you wouldn't have to spend so much time concentrating on that.*

Beatrice said she had taught in a reception class in a *'middle-class-type'* school, and described her perceptions of the children:

> *They would have far more input* [at home]. *They've got more books at home, they watch less television, you know, they are further along the development scale. So, yes, you would do far more intellectual things with them than you would do with these children.*

The other nursery teachers offered different opinions. Anne (Harrington) said, as she was committed to 'independent learning', her aims and objectives would be the same wherever she was teaching. Pam (Catsbury) regarded each child as an individual having her/his own needs, but that she was aware of what children can give as well:

> *I think you learn a lot more from them* [the children] *and are much more a benefit to them if you are receptive to what individuals are doing and the way in*

> *which individuals are developing. And so that would ring true in any setting with nursery children.*

The nursery nurses

The nursery nurses offered opinions on working in other areas which were contradictory to those of their colleagues. When I asked if her aims and objectives would be different in another type of catchment area, Carol (Fiddlebrooke) replied *'No'*. Unfortunately, she did not elaborate on her reply, despite my probing.

The nursery nurses at Catsbury (Susan) and Harrington (Jackie) said they thought that perhaps their aims might be different. Both told me about their experiences in private nurseries.

> *The day in private nurseries was more structured. The children didn't really get a chance to express themselves. Much of what they did was adult-directed. It's not like that here* [Catsbury] *I think it was basically so that the parents could see the work they* [the children] *had done because they were paying. They had to take something home that looked like something.* (Susan, Catsbury)

Jackie, having said that she felt that the programme in the private nurseries in which she had worked was regimented, went on to explain that she was given menial tasks and felt like a *'dogsbody'*.

Comparison of staff responses

To summarise staff opinions on aims and objectives in other catchment areas, I constructed a matrix of responses (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2

Staff Responses to the Question 'Would your aims and objectives be different in a different type of catchment area?'

	headteacher	nursery teacher	nursery nurse
Harrington	no	no	yes
Catsbury	no	no	yes
Fiddlebrooke	yes	yes	no

Interestingly, whilst there was agreement between the headteachers and nursery teachers in all schools, the nursery nurses all made comments which contradicted those of their colleagues. The most salient predictor of staff attitudes regarding aims and objectives in other catchment areas seems to be previous working experience. Pam (NT, Catsbury) and Anne (NT, Harrington) had both had experience of teaching in areas where the children were from poorer families than those they were teaching at present. Carol (NN, Fiddlebrooke) had worked with children who were disadvantaged by virtue of their special educational needs. These three members of staff said that their aims would not change in different catchment areas. On the other hand, Beatrice (NT, Fiddlebrooke), Susan (NN, Catsbury) and Jackie (NN, Harrington) had had experience with children from more middle-class homes and maintained that their aims would be different.

Staff opinions on parental involvement

There is much in the literature regarding the possible effects of both the family and the school on children's development (for example, Douglas,

1964; Rutter, 1985; NCE, 1993). Similarly, there are many reports indicating the benefits of parental involvement in their children's education (for example, Donachy, 1976; Athey, 1980; Tizard et al., 1981). The Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) recommended that there should be 'close knowledge by parents of what the schools are doing and why' (para: 320). Many publications have followed indicating the benefits of such partnerships and how these might be achieved in early years education (for example, DES, 1990; Pugh, 1992; Dowling, 1992). More recently the concept of parents as the child's first educators has evolved (Ball, 1994). Edwards and Knight (1997) offer a continuum of types of parental involvement which ranges from 'parents as clients' to 'parents as partners' (p.71). I had developed a typology for the 'openness to parents' of nursery classes through observation and informal interviewing of staff during the survey, and used it to select the classes for further study in the third phase. Since there is a wealth of literature in support of parental involvement in their children's education, I wanted to pursue this issue in greater depth, and from the perspectives of the different staff groups.

The headteachers

Both Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe (Harrington) and Mr Kitson (Catsbury) said that most parents showed much interest in was what happening in the nursery class. Mr Kitson elaborated, highlighting the important part played by the nursery staff in this process:

> *Parents get sucked into the system in proportion to their interest, I suppose. A valuable role for our nursery staff is to actually encourage their interest and gradually let the parents know what's going on.*

Both headteachers explained that although parental interest was high at the start of children's school lives, this interest tended to decrease.

> *Some parents become so keen that they actually want to help in the nursery and then in school. Others tend to become less involved as their children move through the school.* (Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe, Harrington)

Mr Kitson put forward his opinion as to why parental interest waned as children moved through the school.

> *Unfortunately, when children reach the age of seven or eight, it* [parental involvement] *does begin to tail off ... um ... but it's a fact of life that the novelty wears off.*

But I wonder how much this *perceived* decline in parental support is to do with decrease in 'novelty', and how much to teachers' attitudes towards parents? This issue will be taken up again in Chapter Six when parents voice their opinions.

Miss Priday (Fiddlebrooke) said little about parental involvement. Some parents supported the PTA, but the majority did not. Again she reiterated her comments about the catchment area in which the school was situated, saying:

> ..... *but it's the type of parents that we have. There is a general apathy ... lack of interest.*

The nursery teachers

In agreement with their headteachers, Pam (Catsbury) and Anne (Harrington) spoke of the importance of involving parents. Anne stressed

the emotional needs of both parents and children, especially when the children first start in nursery class. She encouraged parents to stay with their children for the whole of the first week of entry into nursery class, so that both could start to make the emotional adjustment to separation. This practice also gave parents the opportunity to learn about much of what happened in the nursery class.

> *We have to think of the parents' feelings as well. It's a big change for them when their children start in nursery.*

Pam (Catsbury) emphasised the importance of parents having a full knowledge of what was happening in nursery. She encouraged parents to help in the classroom if they wished, and also to linger at the beginning of sessions.

> *It's so important that they* [the parents] *know what is going on in nursery, so that they know what their children are capable of and what their interests are.*

Beatrice (Fiddlebrooke) expressed some frustration over the domineering attitude of her headteacher regarding the involvement of parents, confiding:

> *She* [the headteacher] *doesn't seem to want the parents to be involved. I don't even meet them before the children start nursery; she does that.*

Sadly, Miss Priday's rather stern exterior might instil a lasting impression of the 'staff' in some parents, and indeed might deter the less confident parents from making further approaches. But Beatrice did not seem to

feel that there was a need for parents to know what was happening in the nursery class:

> *The parents here are quite happy to bring their children, hand them over to you and trust that what you're doing is right for their child. It's not very often that you get a parent that actually wants to know what you've been doing.*

In this way she made assumptions about the needs of 'her' parents. Since I observed few interactions between her and the parents, I do not know how she assessed whether her parents wanted to know about what was happening in the nursery. She may be stressing her ideas of her professional role as being that of an expert, who knows better about the education of children than do their parents.

The nursery nurses

The nursery nurses' opinions regarding parental involvement were generally in agreement with those of their colleagues. Susan (Catsbury) explained her ideas:

> *I think it's important that parents know what is going on. They can get ideas of things to do at home.*

Jackie (Harrington) felt it was important that parents did not just come and immediately leave their children. Reflecting on her experience in private nurseries, she expressed negative attitudes towards the parents using them because of their lack of involvement.

> *It was* [private nursery] *somewhere to put their children while they worked. It shouldn't be a dumping ground.*

Carol (Fiddlebrooke) held a very different opinion. When asked her views on involving parents in their children's nursery education, she answered:

> *I can see that as a problem actually. I think some children are very clingy and should make a break from their parents here before going into school.*

Perhaps I should have further probed her ideas here as she may have been equating parental involvement with physically helping in the classroom.

Comparison of staff attitudes towards parental involvement

What seems apparent is that there was some agreement amongst staff within each school regarding involving parents in the workings of the nursery class. All the staff at Harrington and Catsbury considered that parental involvement in their children's nursery education was important, whereas staff at Fiddlebrooke were opposed to involvement or did not think it a necessary requirement of nursery education. None of the schools had *written policies* on parental involvement.

Staff talking about 'quality' in nursery education

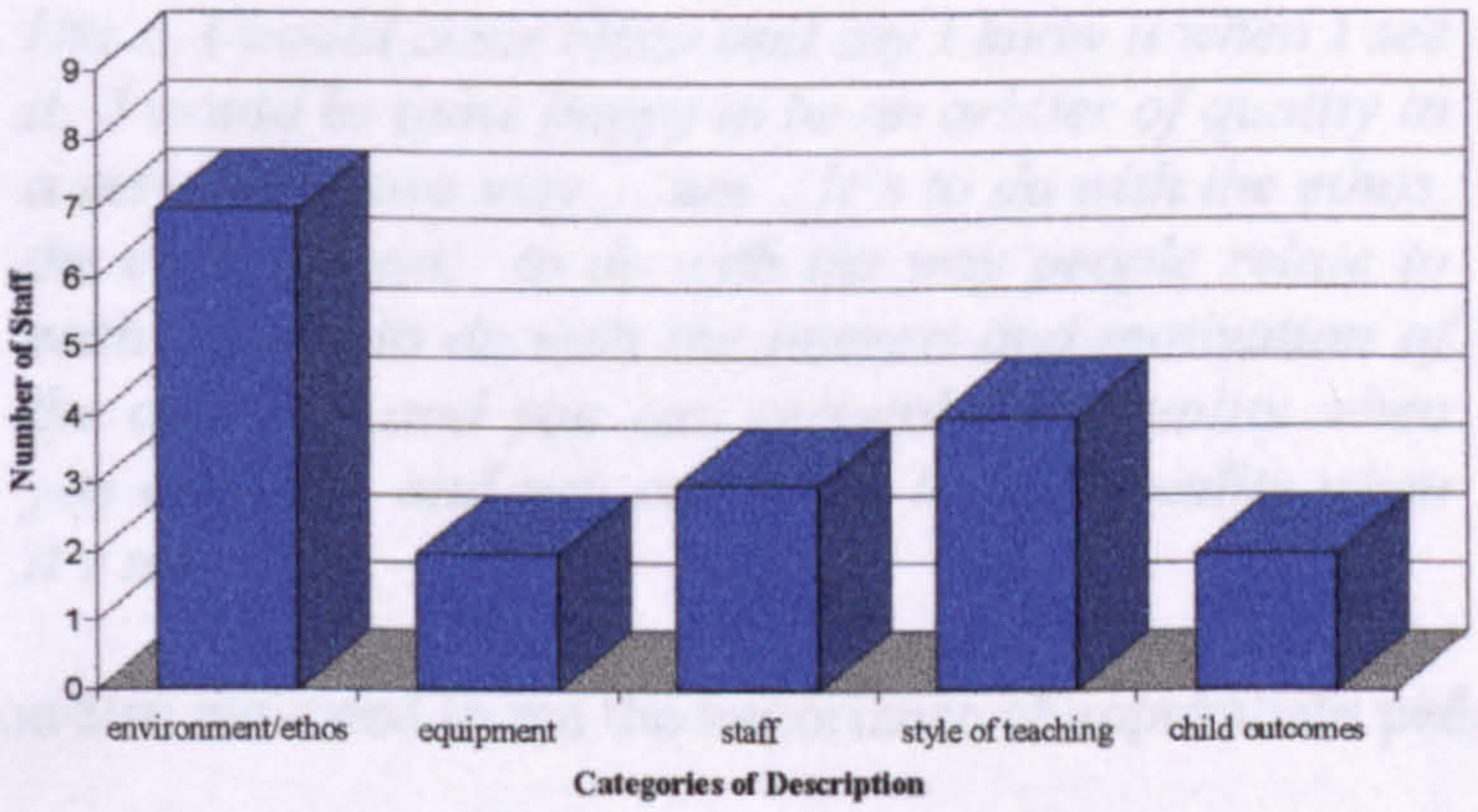
Staff seemed to perceive 'quality' in nursery education in qualitatively different ways. Therefore I applied phenomenographic analysis within NUD.IST on the staff's responses to this question. As a result of this analysis I created five categories of description which were:

- environment/ethos
- equipment

- staff
- style of teaching
- child outcomes

The extent to which members of staff made responses which fell within the various categories of description is illustrated in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3: Categories of Description Relating to Staff Perceptions of 'Quality' in Nursery Education



A greater number of staff stressed the overall environment of the nursery class as being an indicator of 'quality' than other aspects. But within this category of description emphasis shifted between general organisation and overall environmental ethos.

The headteachers

Mr Kitson (Catsbury) and Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe (Harrington) both felt the general environment of the nursery class was an important feature of 'quality' in nursery education. Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe stressed the organisation of the environment, explaining:

> *Well, it's the preparation beforehand, in the room before the children get here. Everything is in the right place so that the children know where things are. Everything is presented well. I would expect*

perfection, if I could get it, everywhere. I think that's quality.

Certainly the organisation and appearance of the classroom at Harrington was in line with Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe's ideas on 'quality', everything in its place and beautifully presented. Mr Kitson (Catsbury) felt 'quality' was to do with general ethos, and something which could not be measured.

Um ... I would come clean and say I know it when I see it. I would be quite happy to be an arbiter of quality in a very subjective way ... um ...It's to do with the ethos, the environment; to do with the way people relate to each other; to do with the interest and motivation of the children, and you can certainly see quality when you are in it, and you can see a lack of quality when it's missing.

Mr Kitson also indicated to me the importance of appropriate pedagogy:

The education of young children depends an awful lot on spontaneity and taking opportunities.

What Mr Kitson said here certainly agreed with the philosophies of his nursery teacher regarding optimal styles of teaching and learning for nursery-aged children. But this was not surprising since the school (Catsbury) did have a *written policy* for their nursery provision.

Miss Priday (Fiddlebrooke) stressed that:

I wouldn't think quality is whether a child can read, write their name ... if you like, testable things.

But she emphasised other child outcomes:

I think quality is ... um ... I think a child who has confidence to tackle new work and confidence to tackle

> *new experiences ... so whatever is put before them, they should be happy to get on with next task.*

Her last phrases '*... whatever is put before them, they should be happy to get on with the next task*' indicate to me didactic pedagogy in which the adult, and not the child, leads the learning experience (as was evident from my observations at Fiddlebrooke).

The nursery teachers

The nursery teachers made similar suggestions regarding the concept of 'quality' in nursery education in that all emphasised the overall environment. Anne (Harrington) highlighted the unmeasurable nature of 'quality' saying:

> *You either get good vibes or bad vibes. I mean, you can walk in straight away and feel 'This is right'. ..... um ..... I think happy children and happy parents. I think if the children are happy and the parents are happy, I think that goes hand in hand with quality nursery education.*

She also stressed the happiness of the staff as being an important feature of 'quality' in nursery education.

> *I think if I went into a nursery and it felt warm, welcoming and the staff were happy, obviously happy, then there is obviously quality going on there.*

I have to admit that I certainly felt very welcome at Harrington, and the staff *appeared* to be very happy in what they were doing.

Pam (Catsbury) also mentioned a happy atmosphere and children enjoying themselves. But she stressed in addition her commitment to a

child-centred pedagogy when describing her perceptions of 'quality', saying:

> *I would be looking for a setting in which children are having a say in what is happening and making decisions; a setting in which children were being valued and learning to value each other.*

Beatrice (Fiddlebrooke) emphasised the importance of a stimulating, stable environment in which the child is treated as an individual.

> *I think quality nursery education is giving children a safe, reliable sort of environment where everyone is treated equally, where children are made to feel that they are important individuals ... each one is given individual attention and is assessed, if you like, individually and given help in tasks and .... um .... input.*

I want to suggest that her didactic style of teaching was reflected in what she was saying when she mentions giving help in tasks and input. She reiterated her headteacher's comments, who talked of the importance of raising children's self-esteem, when she stressed that children need to be made to feel important. But yet again she commented on the children's backgrounds:

> *I think that stability is very important. Many of our children come from an unstable background where they have one parent at home .... well, that's okay in itself, I suppose, but a lot come from the sort of home where there are, you know, boyfriends. They come from the sort of homes where they're never quite sure who's going to be there.*

She seemed to be assigning the *majority* of the children in her charge to a very particular type of home background when she used the words

'many' and 'a lot'. Perhaps she was right, but I could not help feeling that she was making assumptions about the families using the nursery. This type of background may have applied to only a few children, but such a deviation from the 'norm' may have caused Beatrice to exaggerate the situation, such that she made sweeping generalisations. Whatever the circumstances, Beatrice certainly seemed to believe that she was fulfilling a need in these children, making up for deficits in their family life. Such a belief seemed to impact on her perceptions of 'quality' in nursery education.

The nursery nurses

Interestingly, the nursery nurses seemed to find the question on 'quality' in nursery education very difficult to answer. All three stressed the importance of *staff ratios* and *staff training* as being associated with 'quality'. Perhaps, because they had had experience in other forms of pre-school education which had different staff ratios and no trained teachers (playgroup and private nurseries), the issue of staffing seemed very important to them. Carol (Fiddlebrooke) complained about the lack of in-service training within the LEA, saying that one feature of 'quality' nursery education was:

> *.... staff being able to extend their learning through courses and things like that, because that's not ... um ... I don't find that's readily available.*

Susan (Catsbury) and Jackie (Harrington) also stressed the importance of the style of teaching:

Um ... I think it's [quality] *what you put into it, how you approach it. I think I would look for how the staff work .. um .... and to actually see how well they cope.* (Susan, Catsbury)

Providing the right amount of stimulation within a structured programme. (Jackie, Harrington)

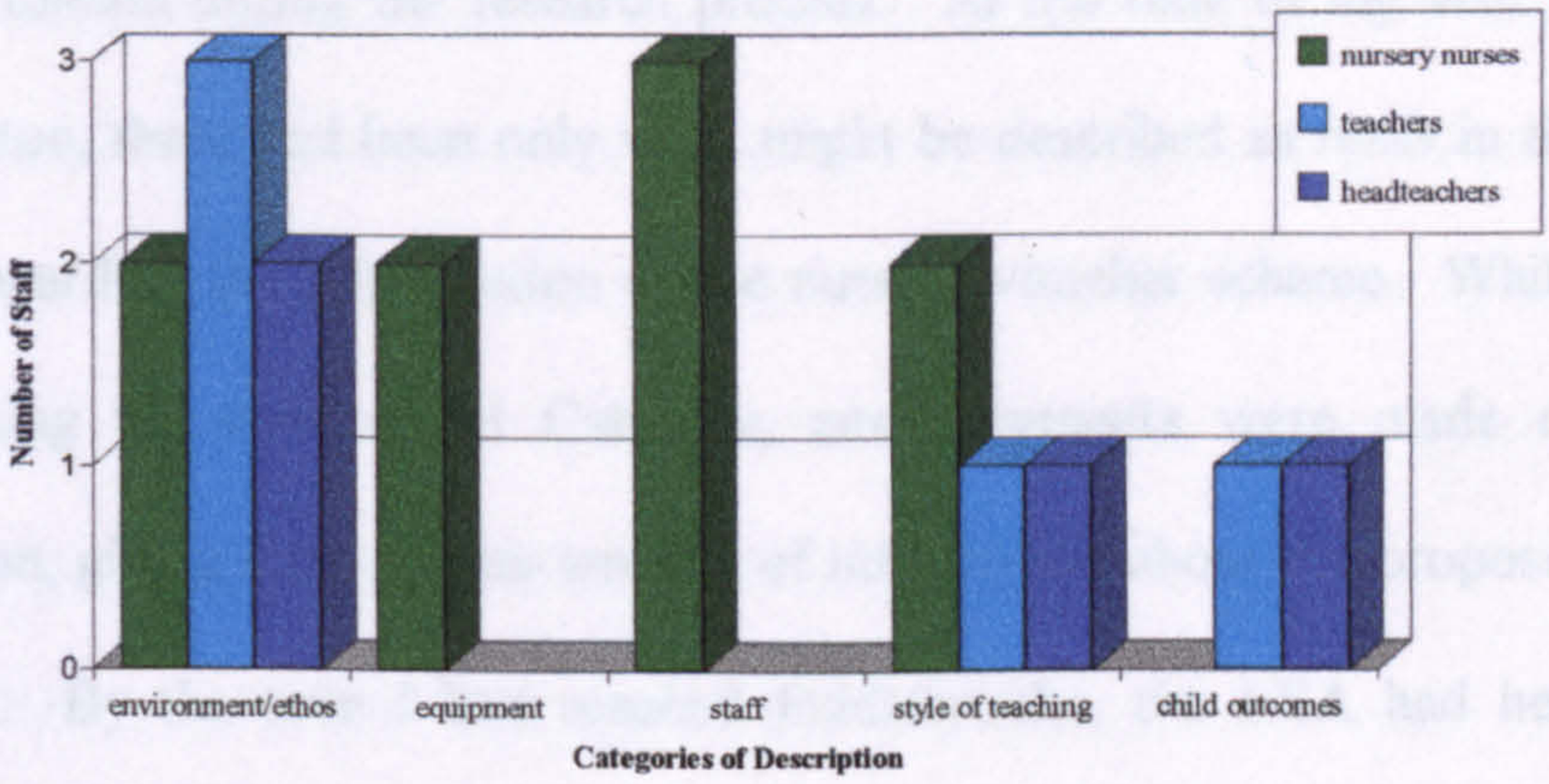
Two nursery nurses (Susan, Catsbury and Carol, Fiddlebrooke) mentioned the right amount of good equipment as being one feature of quality in nursery education. But Jackie (Harrington) did not mention equipment. Perhaps because Harrington was so well equipped, Jackie took this aspect for granted. The other nursery nurses, on the other hand, were in classes which were less well equipped than Harrington. Since the nursery nurses were responsible for much of the care of equipment, then possibly this feature of the nursery was particularly salient for them.

Comparison of staff perceptions of 'quality'

Figure 5.4 (over) illustrates the number of staff in each group making responses which fall within the different categories of description relating to 'quality' in nursery education.

There was general agreement between headteachers and nursery teachers regarding their perceptions of 'quality' in nursery education. This agreement was also evident *within schools*. Since staff knew that I was coming to discuss 'quality' in nursery education, there may have been some collusion with regard to providing the 'right' answers, or simply discussion on the topic before the interviews took place.

Figure 5.4: Number of Staff Making Responses Within the Categories of Description Relating to Perceptions of 'Quality' in Nursery Education by Different Groups



The nursery nurses, on the other hand, whilst agreeing with other members of staff on some points, offered a greater variety of suggestions as to what might constitute 'quality' in nursery education. This may have been the result of the nursery nurses engaging in less discussion on the topic with other members of staff. However, the way in which all the nursery nurses answered this question warrants consideration. Whilst the headteachers and the nursery teachers highlighted one or two topics and then elaborated on these at some length, the nursery nurses tended to offer a *list* of features they thought to be associated with 'quality' in nursery education. Such a difference in methods of response may have been due to headteachers and nursery teachers being more used to talking at length and elaborating on themes, by virtue of their different roles.

Staff opinions of the nursery voucher scheme

The voucher scheme was abolished during the writing of this thesis, and so I offer only a short discussion on this issue. The proposed

introduction of the voucher scheme was receiving increasing media and press attention during the research process. At the time of my visit to Harrington, there had been only what might be described as *hints* in the press regarding the introduction of the nursery voucher scheme. Whilst conducting my research at Catsbury, announcements were made on television, giving a far greater amount of information about the proposed scheme. By the time I had reached Fiddlebrooke, the LEA had held meetings for staff in order to explain the system. Therefore, as my research progressed, opinions were being given within a changing context in which there had been varying degrees of macrosystem influence (press, TV, LEA).

None of the staff thought the voucher scheme would do anything towards achieving or improving 'quality' in nursery education. The staff at Harrington and Catsbury (the least informed) were concerned that many private institutions would be set up which would not come under the jurisdiction of the LEA. Staff at Fiddlebrooke (the most informed) were concerned that the 'light touch' inspections which had recently been announced by the Government would be insufficient to monitor 'quality' in the many new private nurseries which were likely to open. Headteachers at Catsbury and Fiddlebrooke were worried about finance, and that losing pupils to other pre-school institutions might force the closure of their nursery class.

Summary and discussion

My use of open questions encouraged staff to express their own opinions. I had obtained information on curriculum and pedagogy during informal interviews with staff during the survey visit. Questions on aims and objectives and 'quality' in nursery education in this phase revealed something of staff philosophies on these issues.

The relationship between roles and perceptions within the microsystem was evident. I take up this issue again in Chapter Eight when I attempt to 'crystallise' (Richardson, 1994, p.522) my findings.

I suggest the constructs or 'baggage' which staff bring to the microsystem could impact on perceptions of others (parents and children), and can be considered an exosystem interaction. The negative attitude towards parents and children from lower socio-economic groups, expressed by the headteacher and the nursery teacher at Fiddlebrooke, might be one situation in which this interaction occurs. Assumptions about the inadequacies of parents and children from lower socio-economic groups are echoed in findings in other studies (Gipps, 1982a; Hughes et al., 1991; Hatton et al., 1996), and were also indicated in my survey. Hughes et al. (1991) highlight the belief of professionals that 'the educational environment which working-class parents provide is defective or inadequate' (p.105). These opinions exist despite evidence from research by Wells (1983) and Tizard and Hughes (1984). Tizard and Hughes, (1984), found that both middle-class and working-class girls

engaged in complex conversations with their mothers at home. Wells (1983) points to similar evidence in his study of 40 children which indicated that there are 'no clear cut differences between [social] classes in the use of language' (p.138). I suggest such research findings are not being transmitted to staff via professional publications, or through in-service training - a macrosystem interaction. Whilst acknowledging the different cultural context in which the study took place, it is interesting to note Hatton et al.'s (1996) illustration of how teachers in one primary school in Australia held low opinions of working-class pupils and their families. The authors conclude that:

> While the deficiencies teachers perceive in these families are often no more than a failure to be middle-class, they are used to explain low levels of academic achievement (p.43).

However, whilst staff at Harrington and Catsbury did not actually express negative attitudes towards the parents and types of home background of the children in their schools, it could be argued that such attitudes may have been implicit in their reasons for their practice of being open to parents. By making parents aware of what was happening in the nursery class, staff may have been equating parental involvement with parental education, a factor evident in research by Hughes et al. (1991), and hence stressing implicitly a deficit model in the parents. Hartley's (1993) study of three nursery schools, showed the two schools in working-class areas to be more open to parents than the one in a middle-class area. He

suggests 'This openness towards parents may have been an unintended form of family therapy' (p.87). Yet a counter argument is offered by Edwards and Knight (1997) who, when discussing open school environments, assert 'Openness of this kind implies a respect for parents as informed carers with a part to play in the education of their children' (p.75).

Hartley (1993) also highlighted the different curriculum experienced by those children in the middle-class area. He maintained:

> The notion of separate, discrete 'skills' to be checklisted did not figure at Fieldhouse [middle-class]. The reason why the pre-school 'skills' were not stressed was because the children already had them. (p.54)

However, the three classes in my study were situated in *similar* catchment areas, but evidenced *differing* pedagogies and degrees of openness to parents.

Concluding Thoughts

Now where was 'I' in all of this? Perhaps I should say, 'Where were the 'mes'?'. Scientist Me took the leading role in this chapter, for as I said in Chapter Two, I was unable to feel emotional involvement in this part of the research. Teacher Me was there too, talking as a professional. Dramatist Me took a minor role and described my lived experience of those parts of the research which had greatest salience - interviewing the headteachers.

This chapter has served to 'give voice' to staff in the three schools. We have heard *their* interpretations of aspects of nursery education, and *my* interpretations of what they said. Their voices will be considered again in Chapter Eight, when they will be brought together with those of the parents and children. Having considered the contexts for voices in Chapters Three and Four, and let the staff speak in this chapter, we move on to 'listen to' the parents in Chapter Six.

Chapter Six

Parents Talking About Nursery Education

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to *attempt* to reveal the voices of the mothers and fathers in my study who took part in focus group interviews. Firstly, I will provide a background by considering some previous research in which parents' views of pre-school education have been sought. I will then give a thematic discussion of the perceptions of nursery education held by the parents in my study.

Whilst presenting as many voices as possible, again much of the following discussion is offered in 'standard' social-scientific mode. However, I have interspersed the text with 'scenes' and small pieces of dialogue from the focus groups in an attempt to give the reader some idea of the 'juice of the lived experience' (Scheurich, 1995, p.24) of the

interviews, and also to acknowledge the importance of taking account of interactions between participants (Kitzinger, 1994). I hope to illustrate the dynamics of the discussions so that perceptions might be interpreted within the context of the research process.

Background

Much research into school effectiveness highlights the importance of parental participation (see for example Mortimore et al., 1985). However, whilst meta-narratives relating to professional perceptions of the purposes of, and 'quality' in, pre-school education abound, few studies attempt to explore parents' perceptions of these issues (Larner and Smith, 1994). Early studies into parents' perceptions of the purposes of pre-school education formed parts of larger projects and revealed disparity between parent and professional opinions (Tizard et al., 1981; Blatchford et al., 1982). However, two recent studies, one in Hong Kong (Ebbeck, 1995) and one in China (Ebbeck and Zhen Goa, 1996), illustrate agreement between parents and teachers regarding the purposes of pre-school education. But, as in the Tobin et al. (1989) study mentioned in the previous chapter, the cultural milieux (macrosystems) need to be taken into account in these studies.

Much recent research into parents' perceptions of 'quality' in early childhood provision relates to parents' choice of day care in different countries (see for example, Vernon and Smith, 1994 [UK]; Karrby and Giota, 1995 [Sweden]; Barraclough and Smith, 1996 [New

Zealand]; Folque and Siraj-Blatchford, 1996 [Portugal]). Some of these studies (Karrby and Giota, 1995; Barraclough and Smith, 1996) highlight the disagreement between parents and professionals as to what constitutes 'quality' provision.

Talking to parents about nursery education

I aim to describe what was actually said by parents in their focus groups, and attempt to make *my own* tentative interpretations. Parents are often considered as a homogeneous group for research purposes and in educational texts (Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997). However, in the following discussion I recognise heterogeneity by describing the perceptions of 'parents' in different schools, in different social groups, in different gender groups, and also of individuals by giving their names (pseudonyms) and some background information (I have given this information on the first occasion the parent 'speaks', but see Appendix A6 for a list of participants and background information). As discussed in Chapter Two, I have classified those who live in council housing as 'working-class' and those who live in private housing as 'middle-class'.

The groups contained varying numbers of participants as, for a variety of reasons, some parents did not turn up (e.g. child unwell, school break-in at Harrington etc.). At Fiddlebrooke fewer parents participated than in the other schools as a result of the way the interviews were organised (i.e. parents having to 'sign up' for particular days). Hence,

Fiddlebrooke's focus 'groups' consisted of two pairs and one individual. However, the parent interviewed individually had a confident disposition, and was chairperson of the local playgroup committee. I did not feel the interview situation intimidated her in any way. The composition of each group was as follows:-

Harrington

Group 1 - three mothers ('quiet')

Group 2 - three mothers ('vociferous')

Group 3 - two fathers

Catsbury

Group 1 - four mothers ('vociferous')

Group 2 - four mothers ('quiet')

Group 3 - three fathers

Fiddlebrooke

Group 1 - one father, one mother

'Group' 2 - one mother

Group 3 - two mothers

The group discussions focused on four major areas based on my framework of interview questions (see Appendix 4). These areas were as follows:-

- the purposes of nursery education;
- other types of pre-school provision experienced by their children;
- quality in nursery education;

- the nursery voucher scheme.

All the focus group discussions started slowly, but soon gained momentum, the relaxed atmosphere seemingly empowering parents to put forward their views, hence moving the research towards 'catalytic validity' (Lather, 1986, p.67).

Parents talking about the purposes of nursery education

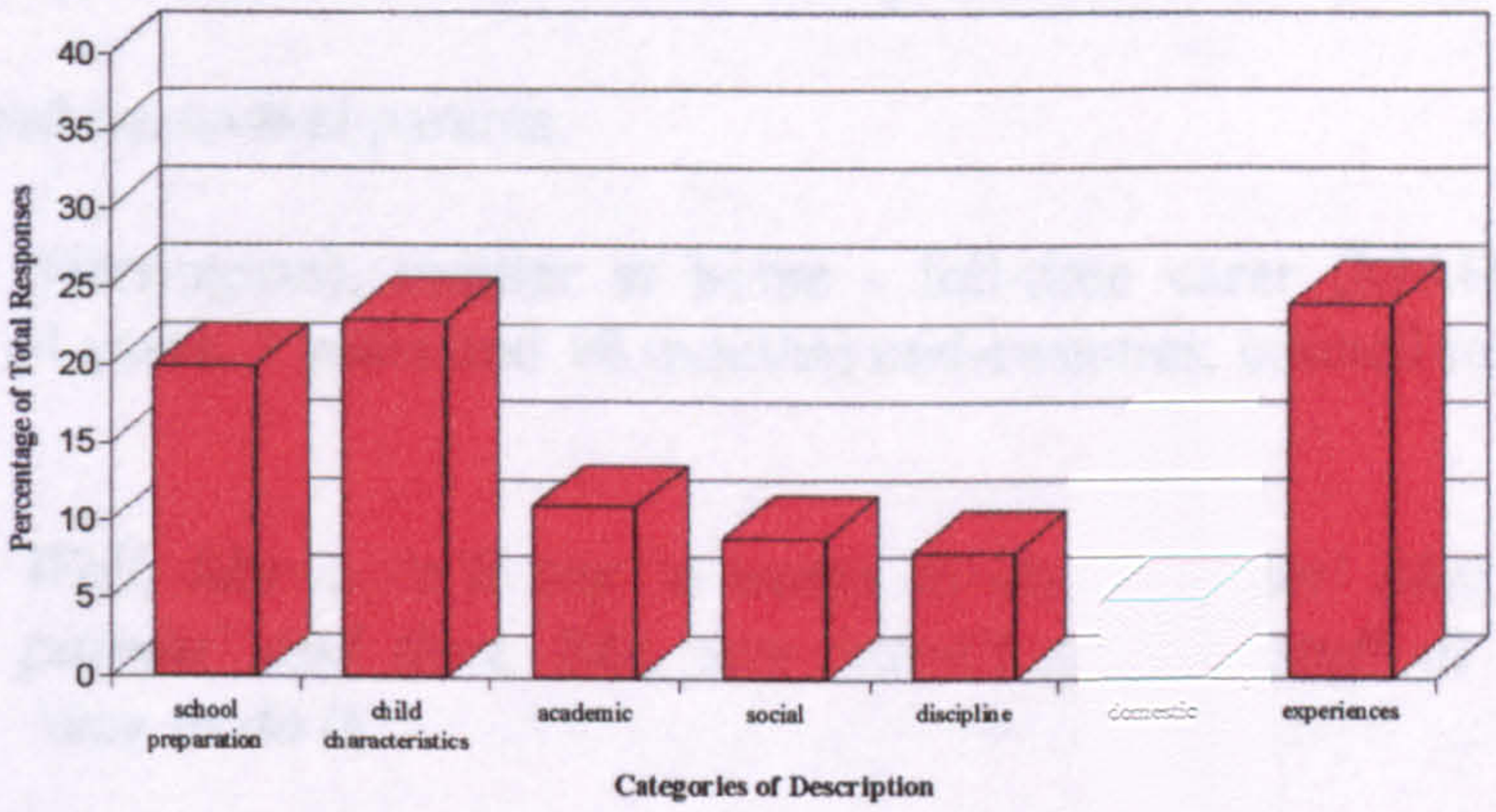
The first question I put to parents was 'What do you consider to be the purposes of nursery education?'

I created seven categories of description:-

- preparation for school
- effects on child characteristics
- academic
- social
- discipline
- domestic
- variety of experiences

Figure 6.1 illustrates the '*flavour*' of discussions across the nine focus groups.

Figure 6.1: Categories of Description Relating to Parents' Perceptions of the Purposes of Nursery Education - Total Sample



Although parents' comments fell into the seven categories of description, discussions tended to focus on three of these: the *variety of experiences* which parents felt nursery education offered their children before formal schooling; the effects on certain *characteristics in their children*; the *preparation for formal schooling*.

A variety of experiences

Parents talked of the variety of curricular activities in which their children could engage while at nursery, and which offered them many different experiences. ***Victor*** (Harrington) early thirties, a car park security guard, living on a council estate next to the school and father of two (6 and 4 years), commented:

> *They can do readin', paintin', cookin', woodwork .... there's a shop in there and everythin'. Well, I mean 'e's just done everythin'.*

The fact that the nursery class offered experiences which were not available at home, or which were not practical to do at home, was highlighted by several parents.

Jemma (Harrington), mother at home - full-time carer (MAH), three children (4 years, 3 years and 18 months) mid-twenties, council tenant.

> *Well, like ... 'e'll say 'e wants to do somethin' like paintin' and then, like, you 'aven't got the stuff at 'ome to do it.*

Laura (Harrington), MAH, late twenties, married, two children (4 and 2 years), homeowner.

> *Um .. it's very difficult, I think, to find time during the day, especially when you've got other children, to do the sorts of activities they do here ... I mean ... because with my two-year-old ... well she's just runnin' round all the time.*

Evelyn (Catsbury), a multiple sclerosis sufferer in her mid-thirties, MAH, married, council tenant, whose only child (a daughter aged 4 years) entered nursery six months early because of her mother's condition.

> *And there are certain things I don't allow 'er to do at 'ome, like stickin'. But when she brings some 'ome from nursery and I look at it .... well, it seems that she's taken a lot of care with it, so perhaps I ought to let 'er.*

The opportunity a nursery class provides for *learning experiences* which the children might otherwise not have, was highlighted by ***Evelyn*** and ***Rosemary*** (early twenties), an unmarried, single parent of two (6 and 4 years) and a council tenant.

> ***Evelyn:*** *She seems to know more about things since she's been 'ere. She's just learnt so much since she's been 'ere.*

Rosemary: *Yeah, like when they went to the farm. I mean, my little girl can name all the animals now. They loved the farm. My little girl is still full of it now. That's what I like about the nursery. They take 'em on these day trips.*
Evelyn: *And like, the frogs. They took 'em to the garden. That's their education.*

Therefore, some parents perceived one purpose of nursery education as being to offer a variety of early experiences which they might not be able to provide themselves, or perhaps which they had not thought of providing.

The effects on child characteristics

Mothers and fathers mentioned various effects, behavioural and cognitive, which they felt nursery education had upon their children. Some parents said that the nursery class had had a calming effect on the behaviour of their children and improved their self-discipline. ***Jemma*** commented:

> *It seems to calm 'em down a lot. Everybody notices the difference in Ben. 'e can get on with things a lot better.*

Other parents suggested that nursery education fostered their children's *independence* and *confidence*.

Tricia (Harrington) mid-twenties, MAH, a single parent of one boy, and living in a council flat opposite the school.

> *Well like, with Brynn, you know, being the only one, 'e wouldn't say anything to anybody. But since 'e's been 'ere, 'e'll talk to anybody. 'e wouldn't do that before. 'e's really come out of 'imself.*

Some parents had noticed improvement in their children's linguistic skills which they attributed to their nursery class experience. ***Simon*** (Harrington, a salesman, married, three children (9, 7 and 4 years), council tenant) *Victor* and I discussed this issue :

> ***Victor:*** *My son, ... 'is language was ... 'is speech was virtually nothin'. It was very 'ard because my daughter did everythin', said everythin'. The little one only went 'Uh! and it was 'Nicholas wants this ... Nicholas wants that'. The little one wouldn't say anythin'. Then when 'e came to nursery, 'e 'ad no choice. 'e 'ad to say somethin'.*
> ***Pauline:*** *Yeah, that happened to one of mine ... used her brother to do the talking.*
> ***Simon:*** *Yeah, yeah, that's right. My little lad's the same as Victor's, you know. 'e's come on a treat. 'e 'ad problems with 'is speech, you know. 'e wouldn't come out with 'ardly any words at all. The same reason; 'is sister done everythin' for 'im.*

Parents were aware of their children's greater interest in their world, a characteristic which they thought that nursery education stimulated; ***Evelyn*** (Catsbury) commented:

> *Yeah, she's more interested in things now. Like, she'll bring in some flies from the garden and show me ... aagh!*

Several mothers mentioned that their children had matured as a result of attending a nursery which was part of a primary school.

Tara (Catsbury) MAH, married, five children (4-12 years), homeowner and ***Deborah*** (Catsbury), married, two children (4 and 2 years), part-time office worker (clerical), homeowner, discussed this issue.

> ***Tara:*** *It's growing up. It's the maturity of them. I found with my eldest daughter ... you see she didn't come to this nursery ... she did go to playschool ... but she went straight into school at five. My son seems*

more mature .. but nursery seems to have that school atmosphere about it.
***Deborah:** It's attached to the school as well. I think they feel more mature because they are, you know, they are going to school.*

Both mothers and fathers seemed aware of the positive effects of their children's nursery class experience. Only one parent, ***Tricia***, mentioned a negative aspect - that her son had picked up 'a few swear words'!

Preparation for school

In the studies by Ebbeck (1995) and Ebbeck and Zhen Goa (1996), Chinese parents considered preparation for school to be one of the most important factors provided by pre-school education. But the authors do not give details of parents' perceptions of the way in which their children were prepared for school. In my study, the *practical* and *emotional* preparation for formal schooling which nursery education offers was stressed by the majority of the parents.

At Harrington ***Jane***, late twenties, mother of one daughter, 8 months pregnant (had been doing part-time office work) and a homeowner, commented:

It gets them ready for the school environment .. you know .. establish a routine .. and throughout the day they get an impression [of school].

Establishing the routine of school was also discussed by ***Janet***, (Harrington), late twenties, married (at 16), five children (4-11 years) and a council tenant.

To get them ready for school, the main thing, I think. Prepares them for school, you know ... they're used to assembly; they're used to the 'all. Being in school they meet the teacher before they start.

Bill (Catsbury), unemployed, two children (6 and 4 years) and a council tenant, remarked on the advantages of sessions being just half a day:

They can start off and it's not all day ... like it's just 'alf a day ... they won't find it so 'ard when it's all day.

Jeff (the only male participant at Fiddlebrooke) who described himself as a 'househusband', had given up his job in a factory to look after his two boys (4 and 2 years - new baby due during the week following the interview) because his wife's salary as a nurse was better than his own. He spoke of the way the nursery class formed a bridge between playgroup and school:

I think it's a transition stage between playgroup and school .... I mean, at playgroup they just sort of play with things, and then 'ere it's more structured before they move on to school.

Children's *emotional* preparation for school provided by the nursery class was stressed by several parents:

You know, it's a bit of a shock, you know, when you go to school one day and there's your teacher, you know .... so off you go. It's a big shock. (**Janet**)

Victor described the experience of starting school from the child's perspective (or was he recalling his own experiences? He did not, however, *admit* to having any problems on starting school).

> *And all of a sudden they just go - bang! And they think 'Crumbs. What's goin' on?' And there's all these people ... and they just disappear into their own little shell ... It's so much better* [the nursery] *than going straight into a massive, big class ... and the day starts then, and I bet some of 'em are thinkin', 'Crumbs, I'm never going to go 'ome.'*

Jemma talked of her own experiences on starting school, and how she did not want her children to have the same problems:

> *But you so want them to settle. I mean, I 'ated school ... I was expelled from one school, but I 'ated it; but I mean, when I started school .... well, I was so close to me mum ... we still are ... I mean, I cried and cried and the teacher just made me sit and face the wall ... I mean, it's so important to settle.*

Rosemary vividly described her memories of starting school.

> *I bit the teacher. I kicked the teacher. I did everything to the teacher .. and me mum 'ad to come and get me. I 'ad a label on me 'Dangerous Child' ... I 'ad literally attacked 'er* [the teacher] *because I didn't know what was going on. I was so scared and angry because I didn't know what was going on. But with my daughter and son, I know they'm ready to start school, and the nursery 'as made 'em ready.*

These early experiences of starting school may have impacted on Jemma's and Rosemary's perceptions of the purposes of nursery education. For them, the emotional adjustment involved in the transition from home to school, which can be provided by the nursery class, is a major reason for

their children's attendance. Both these mothers made repeated remarks regarding their children's ability to settle into school.

Janet, having spoken of the '*shock*' children experience on starting school, said how she delayed her own children's schooling for as long as possible. Part of the dialogue between four women (three 'vociferous' mothers and myself) is offered in the following 'scene'. The scene also demonstrates the dynamic nature of the focus group discussion, and how the research question can quickly go *out of focus*.

Yvette, (Harrington), MAH, late twenties, three children, (4 years, 2 years and 6 months), council tenant, speaks for the first time here. All the participants (apart from myself) live on the local council estate.

* * *

We are sitting in the small nursery office at Harrington, and have been discussing the purposes of nursery education. The participants have agreed that it prepares children for starting school. *Janet* is sitting to my right. She is a large lady in her late twenties, with very short, highlighted hair, wearing a dark blue T-shirt and polyester trousers. She is sitting back in her chair. *Tricia* is sitting on the edge of her chair, next to Janet. She is slight in build with short blonde hair, wearing a bright red jacket, white blouse and black leggings. *Yvette* is sitting on the floor opposite me, her six-month-old baby on her lap, having decided not to sit on a chair so that she could sit near to the other participants. She has long, black hair, and is wearing jeans and a white crochet jumper. Her baby has shown an interest in the tape recorder, and has dribbled on it several times.

> ***Janet:*** (leaning forward) *Well, like now John, 'is birthday is in July, but 'e didn't start until September, and Chris, like 'e'll be five in August and will start in the September. But I kept all mine off* [in nursery] *'til they were five.*
> ***Pauline:*** *Hmm. Yeah.*
> ***Janet:*** *They 'ave enough time after to go to school. I 'ated it.*
> ***Pauline:*** *Well my eldest didn't start school until after he was five, and it hasn't done him any harm.*
> ***Janet:*** (leaning back in her chair) *Mind you, I wish I'd done more at school, I do. I mean, I admit it.* (makes a 'half laugh') *I was terrible. I got expelled.*

Tricia: *And me.*
Yvette: *You never was!* (eyes wide open she glares at Tricia in disbelief).
Tricia: *Yeah* (nodding).
Janet: *But I mean, I don't like 'em at school; I like 'em at 'ome, but I make sure they do come to school. It never did me no good, you know. I wish I'd done more* .... (sitting back in her chair, she now runs her fingers through her hair repeatedly) .... *looking back now, you know, specially as me kids are getting older, I think .... I wish I'd done this or I wish I'd done that or paid attention or gone to school, you know.*
Yvette: *But they've got better jobs now than when we left.* (removes a paper tissue from her pocket and wipes the baby's dribble off the tape recorder).
Janet: *Yeah, well like, Ron .. 'e's a toolmaker now. But, like 'e got advice from where 'e works. I mean, 'e never finished school or nothin'; 'e's been there 22 years. But I mean, it was different then; you could get jobs.*
Tricia: *But jobs now ... you need a bloody degree to work on a supermarket till, don't ya? I mean, it's all the electronics and everythin'.*
(all laugh)
Janet: *And bar codes ...*
(all laugh)

* * *

I suggest Janet's own impressions of school have been influential in her decision to keep her children in the nursery class for as long as possible (until of statutory school age) rather than start them at school as rising-fives. The discussion began to move away from the original question, as it did on several occasions with this group. Interestingly, a similar situation occurred with the group of 'vociferous' mothers at Catsbury, whilst groups of 'quiet' mothers remained 'on task'.

Academic, social, discipline and domestic

Other categories of description which were given less emphasis in group discussions when considering the total sample were *'academic'*, *'social'*,, *'discipline'* and *'domestic'*.

Some mothers and fathers expressed the opinion that the purpose of nursery education was to provide children with literacy skills. ***Colin*** (Catsbury), a shift worker at a local factory, married with four children and a council tenant commented:

> *To give 'em a start, like, to write.*
> *Give 'em a start.*

Kathy (Fiddlebrooke), MAH, early thirties, three children (7 years, 4 years and 10 months) and a homeowner, mentioned the 'Letterland' scheme, as did mothers in other discussions at Fiddlebrooke.

> *I think that with their letters ... well it starts them off for school. James comes home and says these letters - 'That's Annie Apple'... and well, I had taught him my way before he came here and he wouldn't have been prepared for school.*

Judith, (Fiddlebrooke), early thirties, two children (4 and 2 years), a homeowner (worked for the LEA before having her children and was chairwoman of the local playgroup), suggested:

> *Um ...I think it gives them a really good start. I think .. um .. well they start off in playgroup, but when they come here they start doing their letters and things like that. That tends to get glossed over in playgroup.*

Parents in all but two of the groups suggested that nursery education provided opportunities for children to make friends with other children of their own age. *Socialisation* has been shown to be considered an important purpose of pre-school education by parents in other studies (Blatchford et al., 1982; Ebbeck, 1995; Ebbeck and Zhen Goa, 1996).

Pat (Fiddlebrooke), MAH, married, two children (8 and 4 years), and a homeowner commented:

> *The main thing has got to be social interaction. They make friends and they're meeting up with children the same age. They're not having to compete with older children.*

Some parents mentioned the learning of *discipline* as being an important purpose of nursery education. ***Elizabeth*** (Catsbury), late thirties, married, three children (18, 16 and 4 years), a part-time cleaner and a council tenant, suggested:

> *Discipline. It starts the discipline off and they need that don't they.*

Janet laid particular stress on the learning of discipline.

> *They can learn to take orders, you know, follow instructions. I mean, sometimes, when you tell your own children they just look at you straight, you know .... when somebody else tells 'em, I mean it's different isn't it, with other people.*

Having admitted to having been expelled from school, Janet may now be concerned about her own children's behaviour in school.

Both mothers and fathers offered *domestic* needs as being a purpose of nursery education. ***Deborah*** said that the nursery gave her the opportunity to work part-time and that her children went to a day nursery during the school holidays.

Tricia, being a single parent and living in a council flat, described her perspective to her group:

> *Oh, I couldn't wait for mine to come 'ere, I couldn't. But see, I think, like cos I'm on me own, and like, I've got responsibility for 'im twenty four hours a day. 'e only sees 'is dad on Saturday mornings. I've got to 'ave a break. This is my break, you know.*

Two fathers offered their views:

> ***Simon:*** *Well, it works both ways. It's a break for Mum, which I think does them good.*
> ***Victor:*** *Yes, well Rita's actually got a couple of hours when she can do what she wants.*
> ***Simon:*** *You notice a change in the wife as well. The wife improves having that couple of hours, definitely.*

Here I need to consider something of the effect of my own presence on the above dialogue. How did the fact that I was a woman interviewing two men impact upon what was said? These men may have been saying what they considered to be 'the right things' because I was a woman.

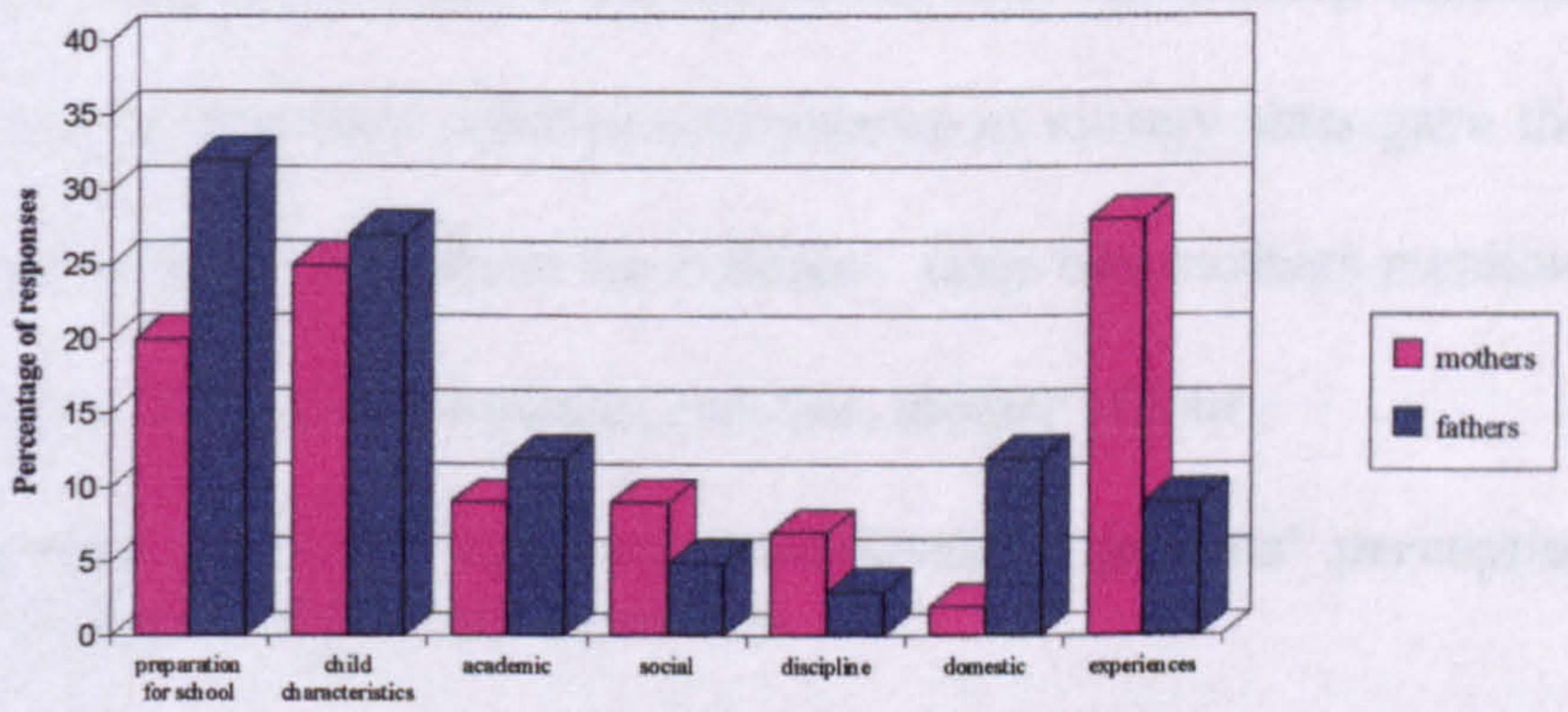
Comparing mothers' and fathers' perceptions of the purposes of nursery education

I now want to consider two macrosystem influences on perceptions - gender and social class. In order to give an overview of the emphasis mothers and fathers placed on each area of discussion, I computed the

number of text units as a percentage of all text units relating to the purposes of nursery education in each gender group.

Figure 6.2 compares the foci of responses made by mothers and fathers.

Figure 6.2:Parents' Perceptions of the Purposes of Nursery Education by Gender Groups



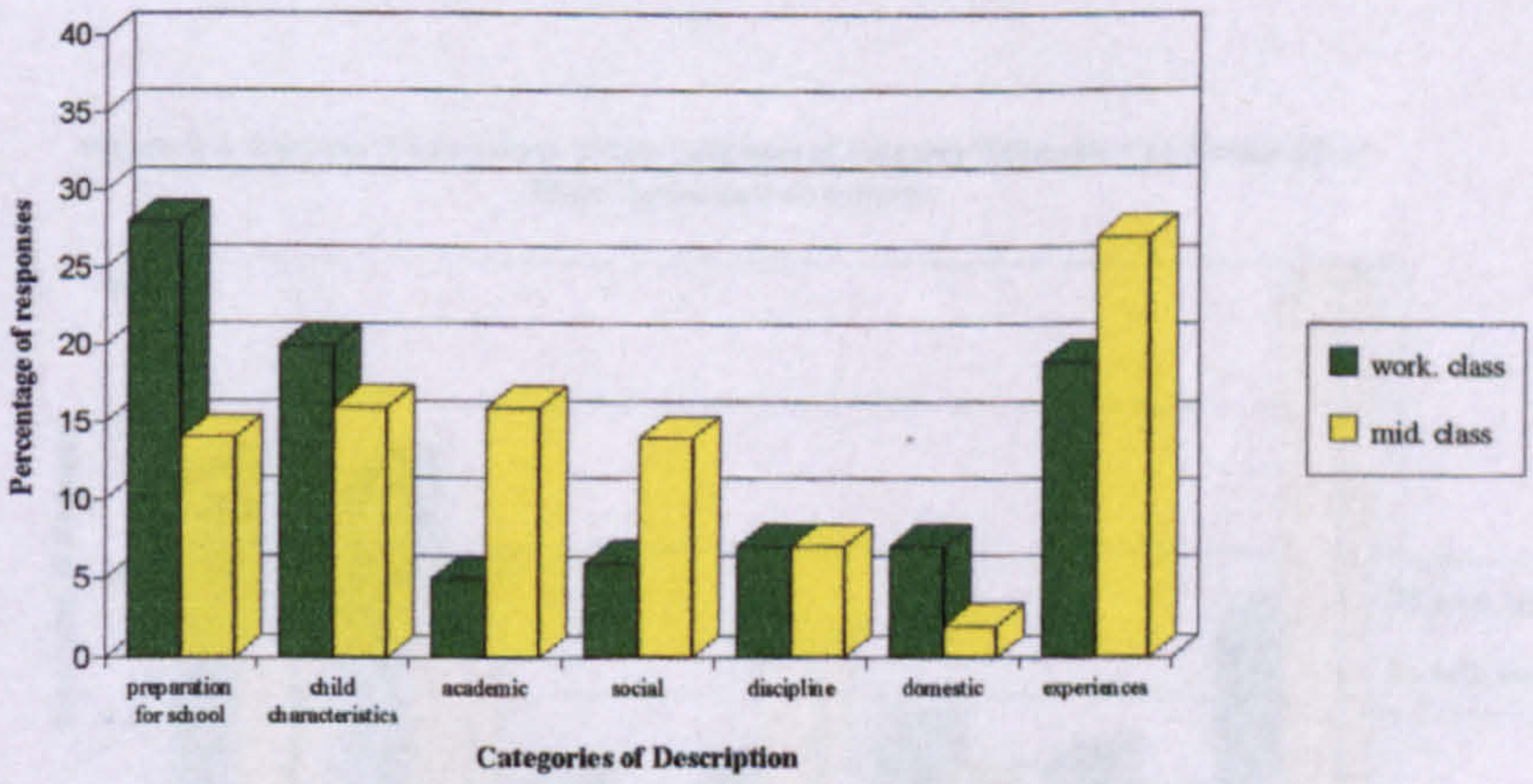
Whilst the categories of description were represented in both groups, proportionately more (60% more) responses in mothers' discussions than those of fathers focused on the overall experiences their children could have as a result of attending nursery class. Perhaps because the majority of mothers spent more time with their children during the day than did fathers, they were more aware of their children's needs for different activities, some of which they felt they were unable to provide at home. Also, the majority of the mothers had more contact with the nursery than did fathers since it was they who brought their children to sessions and collected them, and were therefore more likely to have had greater first hand experience of the workings of the nursery class.

Fathers' discussions focused more on nursery education being preparation for school. But fathers tended to concentrate on preparation for the routine of school, whereas mothers emphasised emotional adjustment. Interestingly, fathers made proportionately more responses in the 'domestic' category of description (80% more than mothers). However, they did not talk of themselves or their wives being enabled to work, but of how their children's attendance at nursery class gave them and their wives a break from the children. Only two mothers mentioned this factor - ***Tricia***, single parent, and ***Sue***, mother of four.

Comparing 'working-class' and 'middle-class' parents' perceptions of the purposes of nursery education

Figure 6.3 compares responses made by 'working-class' (council tenants) and 'middle-class' (private housing) parents.

Figure 6.3: Parents' Perceptions of the Purposes of Nursery Education by Social Class

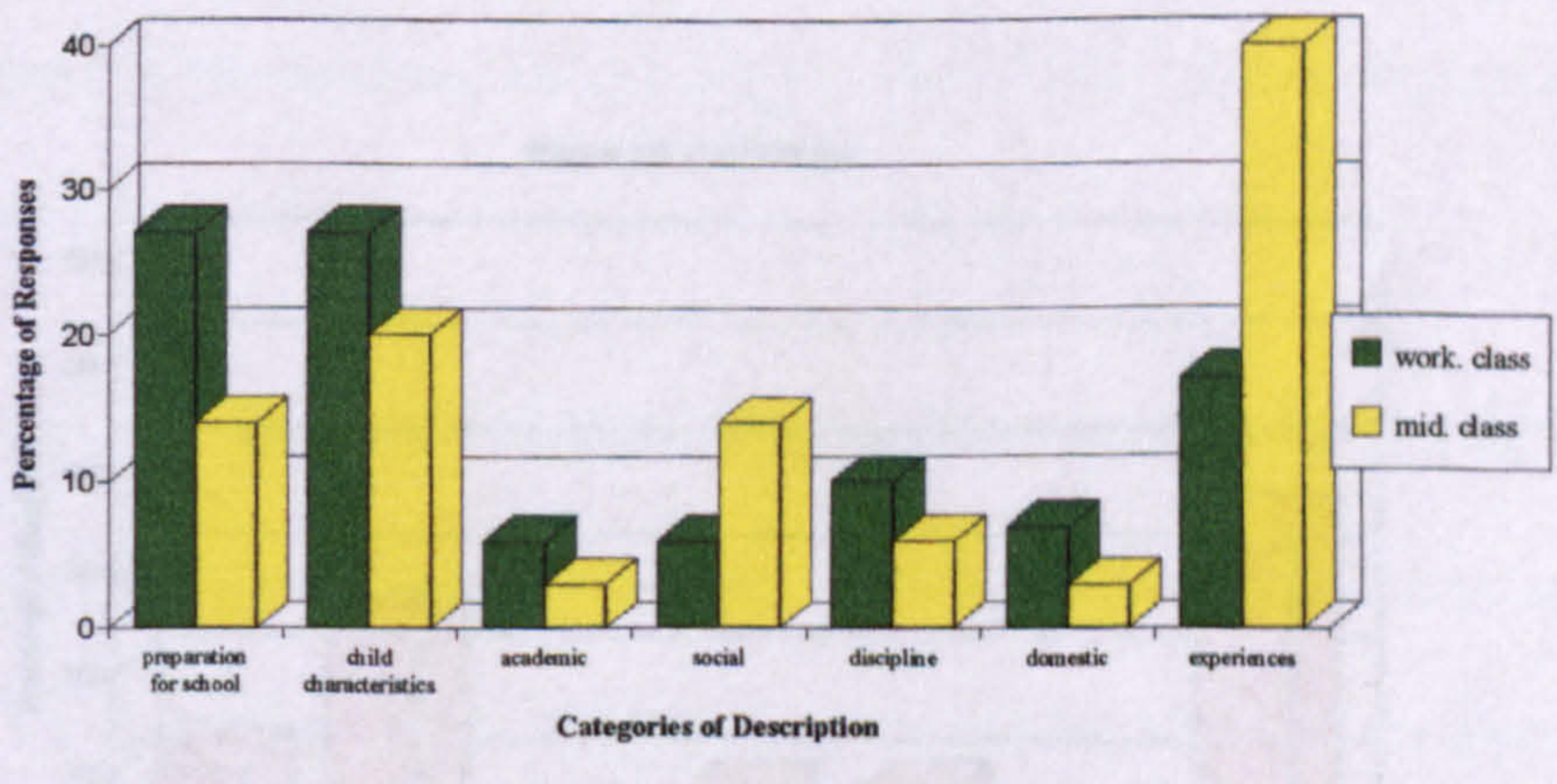


More responses were made by 'working-class' parents than 'middle-class' parents regarding a child's preparation for school as being one of the purposes of nursery education. All those who admitted having bad

experiences at school were 'working-class', and laid stress upon nursery education preparing their children for school. These parents' perceptions may indicate the *cultural* adaptive problems which 'working-class' children experience at school.

'Middle-class' parents focused more on the acquisition of academic skills than did 'working-class' parents. However, I found this surprising since, whilst conducting the interviews and transcribing them, the disparity was not apparent. What was apparent was the emphasis placed on academic skills by parents at Fiddlebrooke, and all of these parents were 'middle-class'. Was it the effect of particular attributes of the setting (microsystem influence) or cultural group (macrosystem influence)? I decided to explore this question further by constructing a bar graph which illustrated responses by the different social groups at Harrington and Catsbury only (see Figure 6.4).

Figure 6.4: Parents' Perceptions of the Purposes of Nursery Education by Social Class - Harrington and Catsbury



Comparing Figures 6.3 and 6.4 similar patterns in responses can be seen when comparing the *total* sample with that of the responses from

Harrington and Catsbury alone. However, the 'middle-class' parents at Harrington and Catsbury did not put so great an emphasis on academic skills, in fact they placed slightly *less* emphasis on these skills than the 'working-class' parents. Therefore, perceptions *may* be due to characteristics of the setting (microsystem), an issue considered in the next section (and in Evans and Fuller (in press b)).

Comparison of parents' perceptions of the purposes of nursery education across settings

Figures 6.5, 6.6 and 6.7 illustrate the focus of the discussions.

Figure 6.5: HARRINGTON

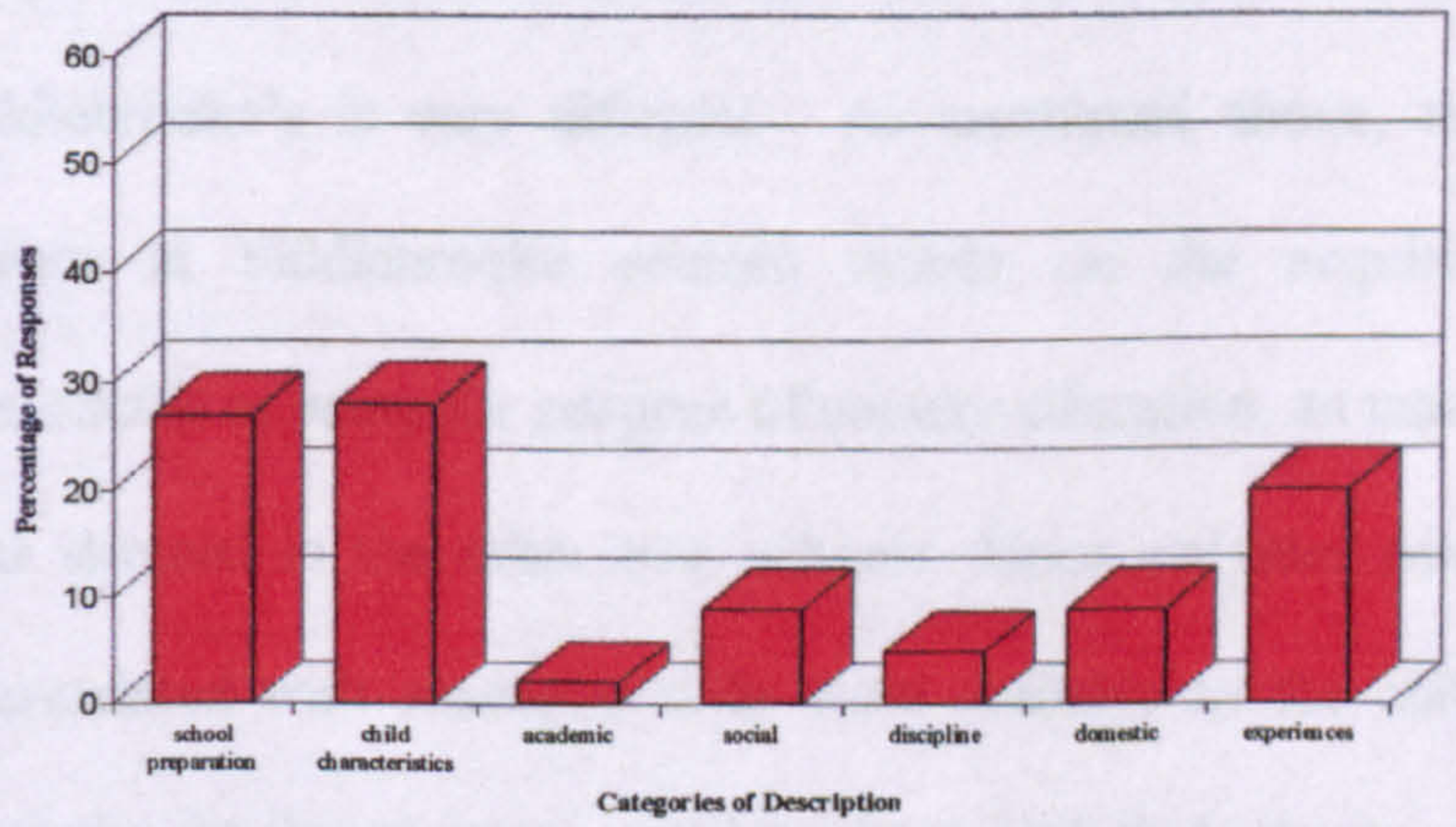
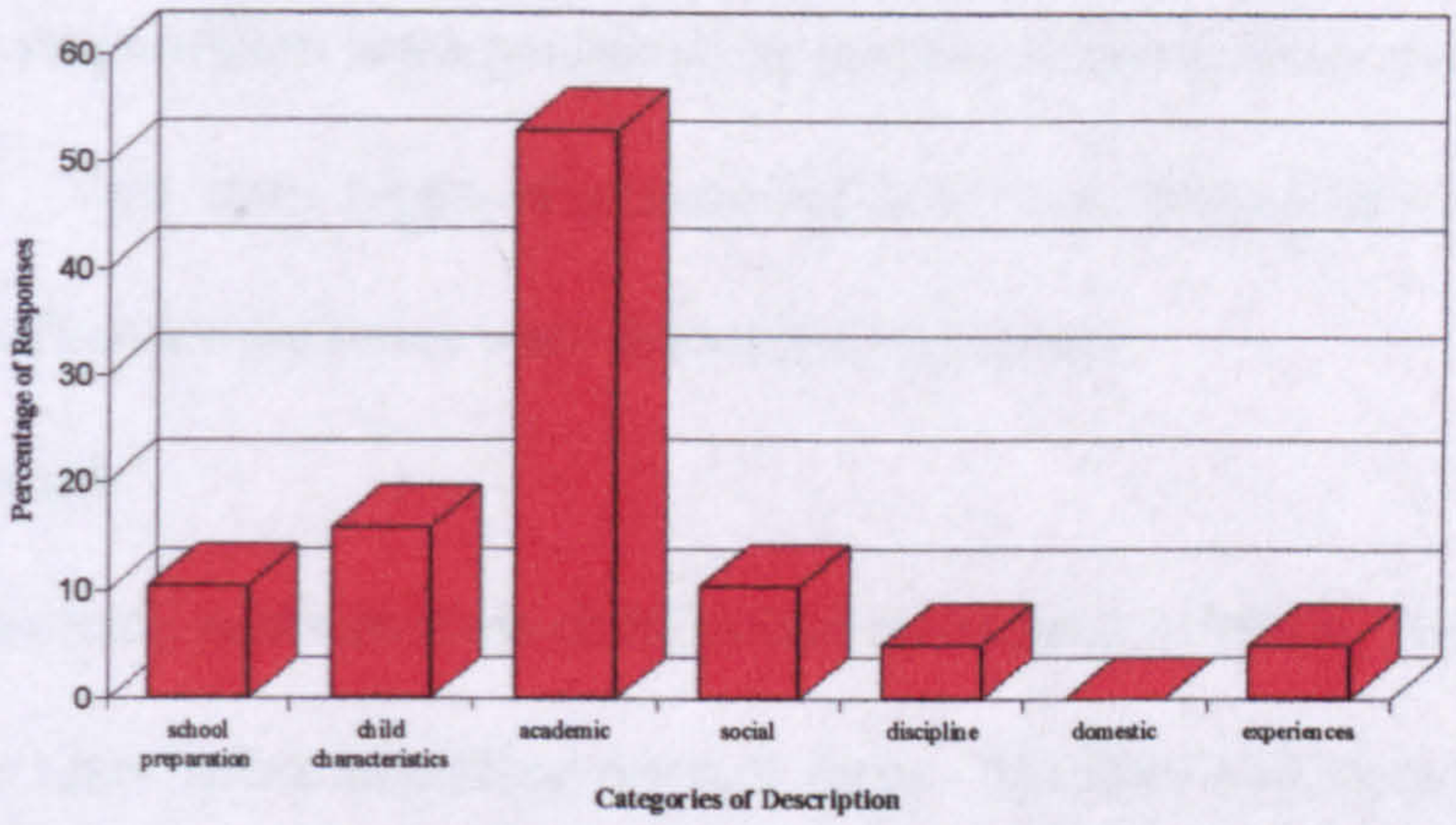


Figure 6.6: CATSBURY

Figure 6.7: FIDDLEBROOKE



Similar patterns can be seen in the data from Harrington and Catsbury, but Fiddlebrooke's is very different. As mentioned above, the three discussions at Fiddlebrooke centred mainly on the acquisition of *academic skills* as being the purpose of nursery education, an issue which was not stressed in the other two schools. Since activities other than those associated with academic skills were available to the children at Fiddlebrooke, its closed nature may have been such that parents were not fully aware of the workings of the nursery class. This issue is discussed further in Chapter Eight.

Parents' perceptions of other forms of pre-school education

Since the majority of children would have had experience of some form of pre-school education prior to attending a nursery class, I included questions in my framework which would enable me to consider parents' perceptions of nursery education within the context of their own, and

their children's, previous experiences. Also, considering issues of 'quality' and parental choice, I wanted to explore how different types of pre-school provision were perceived by parents in comparison to *nursery classes*. Two main types of pre-school provision, playgroups and day nurseries/private nurseries were discussed by parents.

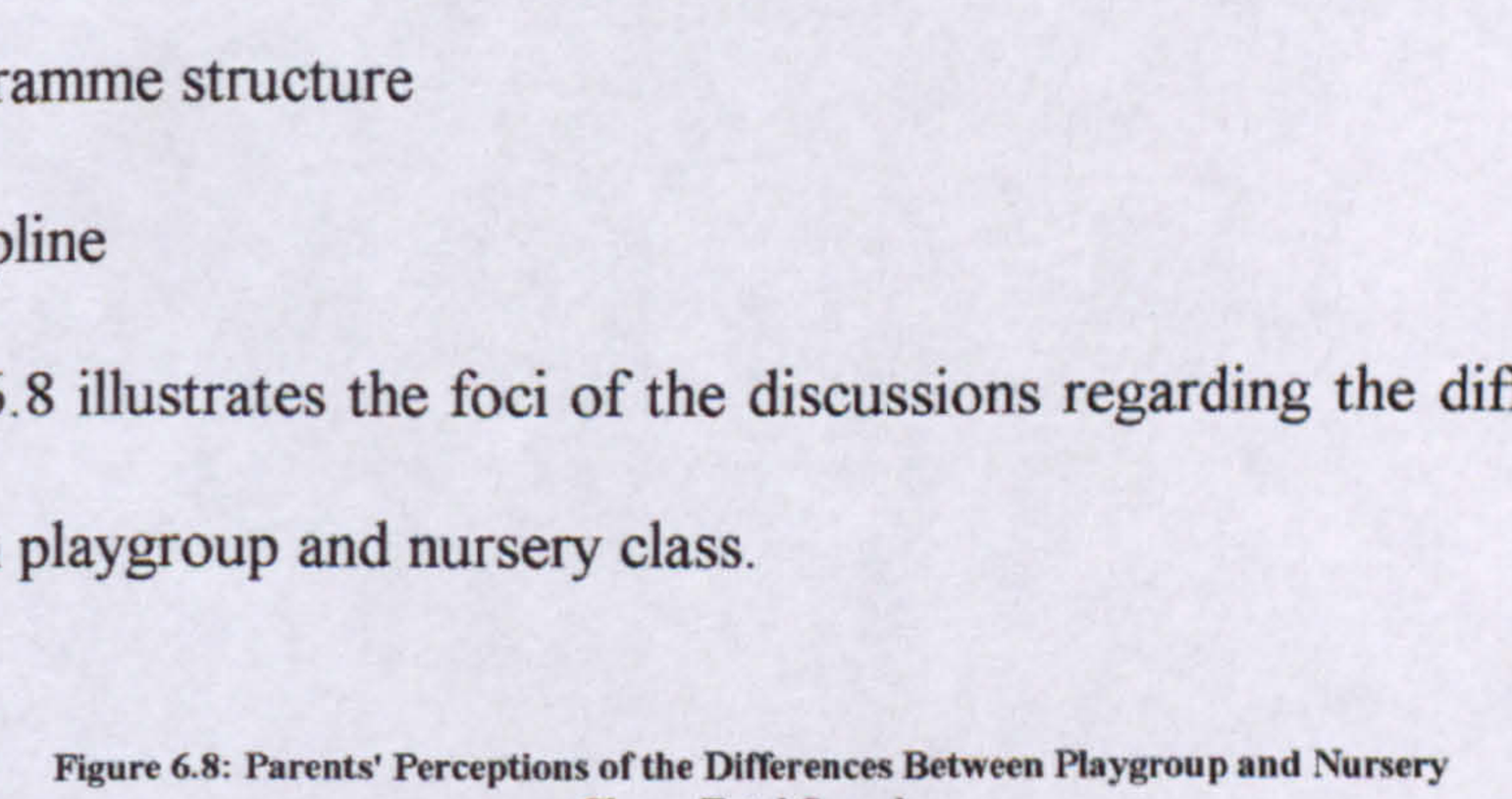
Playgroups

All the parents said that their children had attended a voluntary playgroup at some time before attending nursery class. Mothers and fathers were asked if they perceived any differences between playgroups and nursery classes; their perceptions fell into three categories of description:

- cost
- programme structure
- discipline

Figure 6.8 illustrates the foci of the discussions regarding the differences between playgroup and nursery class.

Figure 6.8: Parents' Perceptions of the Differences Between Playgroup and Nursery Class - Total Sample



Generally, parents felt that playgroups lacked curricular structure. ***Tricia*** and ***Yvette*** (Harrington) highlighted this view:

> ***Tricia:*** *Well, they just went there and played.*
> ***Yvette:*** *They don't learn much, no numbers, no colours, nothin', is there? They just played and made friends ... and just mucked about.*

Tara (Catsbury) echoed these opinions:

> *I think playschool is just an extended sort of home life, really. It's just a larger room with lots of toys. There isn't much else to it. Like, they have to sit down to have a drink. There's lots of running around and there's a few songs, but there's nothing much else.*

But ***Anita*** (Catsbury) late twenties, married, MAH, two children, (8 and 4 years) and a homeowner, pointed out that the age of the children at playgroup needed to be considered.

> *Mind you they were rising-three when they went there. It was the first break from 'ome, let alone anything else.*

What is interesting is that in all the schools some parents mentioned that their children *'just played'* at playgroup, yet their children were seen to be playing in the nursery class. What are parents' understandings of children's play? ***Victor*** and ***Simon*** talked about play:

> ***Victor:*** *But I ask 'im what 'e's done and 'e says 'e's played.*
> ***Simon:*** *Yeah, but it's play with a purpose.*

I suggest that parents may consider that play in a nursery class attached to a *school* provides more beneficial learning experiences.

Mothers and fathers mentioned the difference in cost between playgroup and nursery class, which is currently free. ***Laura*** remarked:

> *I mean it's amazing when you think what we were paying for playgroup - £2.50 a session!*

Levels of *discipline* were also cited as a major difference between playgroup and nursery class by *some* parents, but these comments depended on the playgroups their children had attended.

There were fewer text units corresponding to this part of the discussion than for those relating to the purposes of nursery education. Therefore, I was able to make comparisons using graphs for social class and gender groups, but not to compare the three schools. Figures 6.9 and 6.10 illustrate comparisons in responses made by different gender groups and social class groups:

Figure 6.9: Parents' Perceptions of the Differences Between Playgroup and Nursery Class by Gender Groups

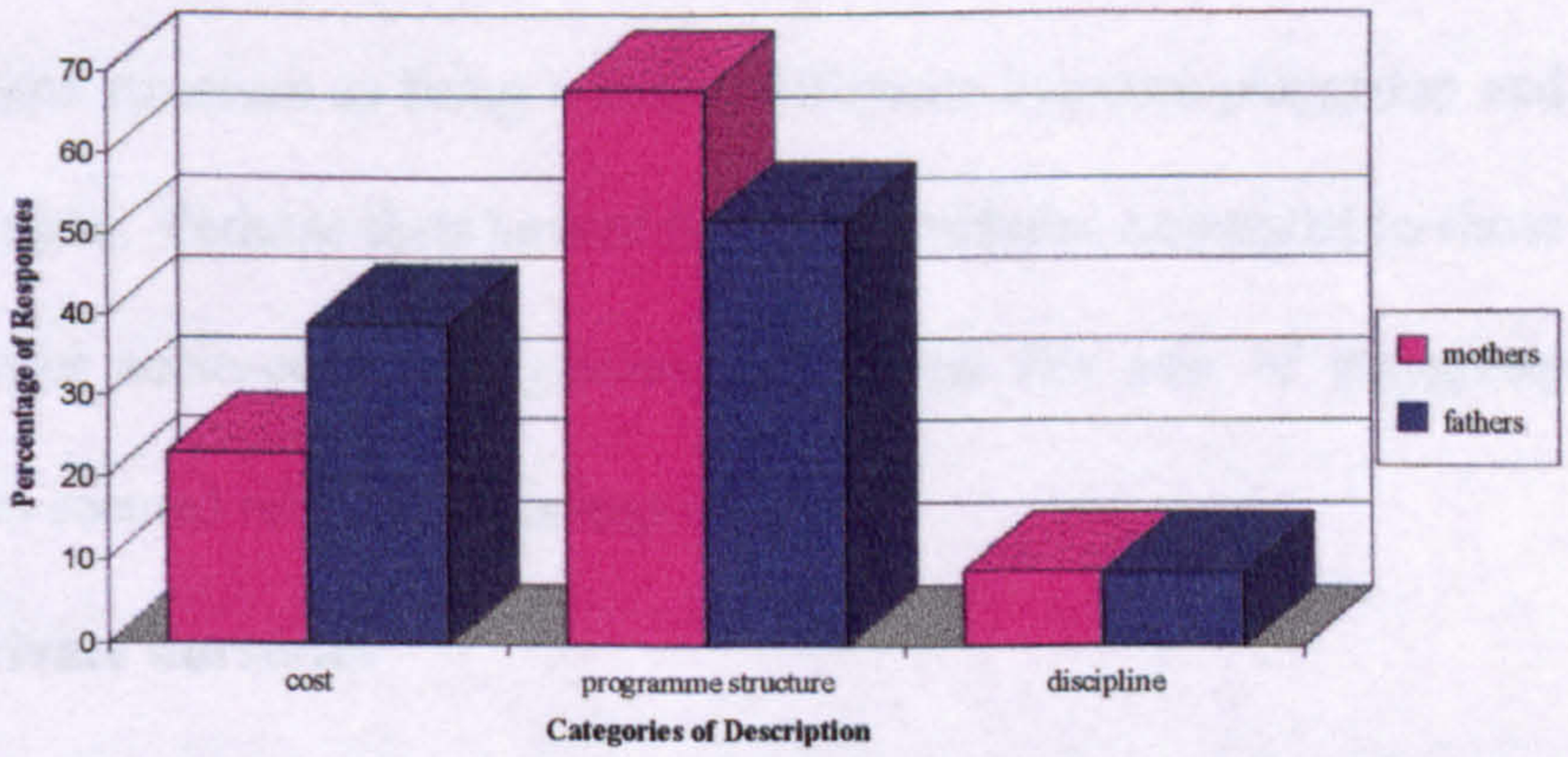
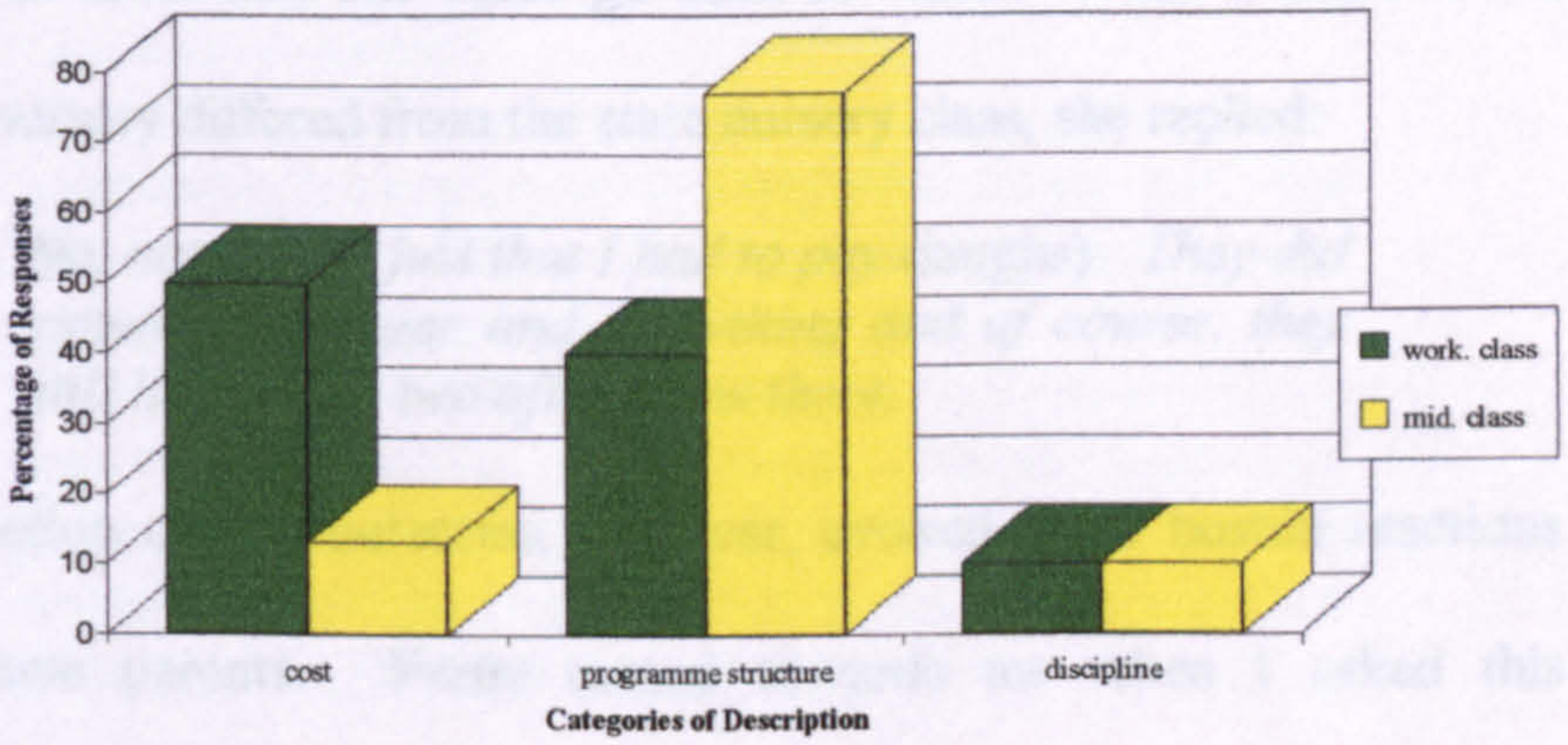


Figure 6.10: Parents' Perceptions of the Differences Between Playgroup and Nursery Class by Social Class



The categories of description were represented in all groups. Fathers placed proportionately more emphasis on the cost of playgroup than did mothers. Working-class parents also stressed the cost of children attending playgroup. ***Yvette*** spoke of the problems of a friend:

> *It was £2.50 over at Clarke Road and that was for two hours. I mean, when you're on the social ... well I'm not, but I've got a friend who is ... it's a lot of money. She 'ad to pay it. The social didn't give it to 'er.*

'Middle-class' parents placed proportionately more emphasis on programme structure as being a major difference between playgroup and nursery class. Perhaps their lack of financial problems, compared to those from lower socio-economic groups, meant that the cost of playgroup provision seemed relatively less important.

Day/ private nurseries

Parents voiced conflicting opinions regarding the use and characteristics of day and/or private nurseries. Some parents (middle-class) had used day nurseries or private nursery schools for their children before they had

enrolled in nursery class. Both ***Deborah's*** sons had attended a day nursery in order that she could go back to work. When I asked if the private nursery differed from the state nursery class, she replied:

> *No, not really, just that I had to pay* (laughs). *They did virtually the same and everything and of course, they still have these two afternoons there.*

The mention of day nurseries, however, evoked some hostile reactions from some parents. ***Yvette*** turned towards me when I asked this question, and glared eye to eye aggressively (well that was *my* perception) as she exclaimed:

> *You shouldn't do that! You shouldn't 'ave your kids and then put 'em into nurseries. I think it's wrong. I mean, you want to do things your way.*

I felt a certain tension in the group at this point. I had told the three women that I had three children, but had they assumed that because I was 'pursuing a career' that I had used day nurseries for my children? My role in the group was to try to act as a facilitator for the discussion, and I felt the need to be accepted as a 'member'. I detected a certain animosity in their attitude at this point in the discussion. I was being 'othered'! As a result of these feelings, I felt I had to disclose some of my own opinions. I told the women that I had given up my job after having my first baby, as I felt I could not possibly hand him over to someone else, someone who could not, or would not, give him all the attention that I felt he needed. Suddenly, I was back in the group again! The atmosphere relaxed and ***Janet*** and ***Yvette*** continued:

Janet: *That's right. I mean, if you were to put a baby like that in a nursery* (pointed to Yvette's 6 month-old son who was in the room with her) *you know, what if 'e wants 'is bottle?*
Yvette: *I mean, 'e won't know who 'is mum is. I mean, sometimes 'e wants feeding every four hours, and then other times it's like three hours, and I mean, who's going to see to 'im?*
Janet: *I've been to some day nurseries and there's some of them there, you know, they're six weeks old.* [Yvette gasps] *Well, 'ow do you know if they're looking after 'em properly? I mean, they might not know if 'e's off his food or anythin'.*

Tricia eventually joined the discussion saying that she thought a mother should stay at home and look after her child. But I have to consider whether she was conforming to the general attitudes of the group? Did she want to remain a 'member'? Interestingly, remarks against the use of day nurseries were only made in the focus groups in which none of the participants had used them. Therefore, I need to give further consideration to the impact individual group members have on the dynamics of the discussion. Such contemplation encourages me to consider each focus group as an event, or perhaps a 'mini-microsystem' in itself. Group members may bring exosystemic experiences to the group which may impact on the opinions voiced.

Every father spoke against the use of day nurseries, all but one saying that they wanted their wives to be at home with the children while they were of pre-school age. George (Catsbury) a subpostmaster and grocer, married (two children) and a homeowner, commented:

> *I don't like it* [using day nurseries] *to be quite honest. I'd much rather my wife was at 'ome with the children*

when they're very young. It might seem old-fashioned, but that's what I think.

Jeff (househusband), offered a slightly different perspective:

Personally I'm against that ... I feel that as parents, if you make a conscious decision to have a baby, then you should be prepared to look after it. I don't agree with farming kids off. I realise that these days there are more pressures from society for parents to keep jobs. I'm not saying that a woman's place is in the home, because it is as much my responsibility as hers. With us, I mean, I'm at 'ome with the children and the wife works.

By including aspects of the discussions on day nurseries, I hope to have revealed something of participants' views on child-rearing practices, and hence, perhaps, further contextualise opinions on the purposes of, and 'quality' in, nursery education.

There were insufficient text units relating to day nurseries to compute percentages and, hence, construct bar graphs for comparisons of gender groups. However, a matrix search in NUD.IST revealed that more 'working-class' parents spoke against day nurseries as a form of pre-school provision, but there was little difference in opinions expressed by mothers compared to fathers and in the different schools.

Parents talking about 'quality' in nursery education

When I asked the question 'What would you say is meant by 'quality' in nursery education?', a period of silence followed in all the groups. Staff, had found this question quite difficult to answer, and parents also seemed to find it particularly troublesome. Perhaps this underlines the difficult

nature of the concept of 'quality'. Because 'quality' might be equated with 'perfection', perhaps parents felt that a *correct* answer was required, and feared making a mistake. I therefore rephrased the question, saying 'What *for you* is 'quality' in nursery education?' Put this way, the question emphasised the relative, values-based nature of 'quality'; there was therefore no 'correct' answer. Parents began responding to the question, but admitted to it being difficult to answer:

> *It's the sort of thing you need to sit back and think about.* (***Simon***)

> *I mean when you're not qualified you don't know what you're looking for.* (***Judith***)

I find this last comment interesting when considering the Conservative Government's insistence at that time on offering parents choice in nursery education through the voucher system, which some believed would produce 'quality' provision through market forces (Soskin, 1995).

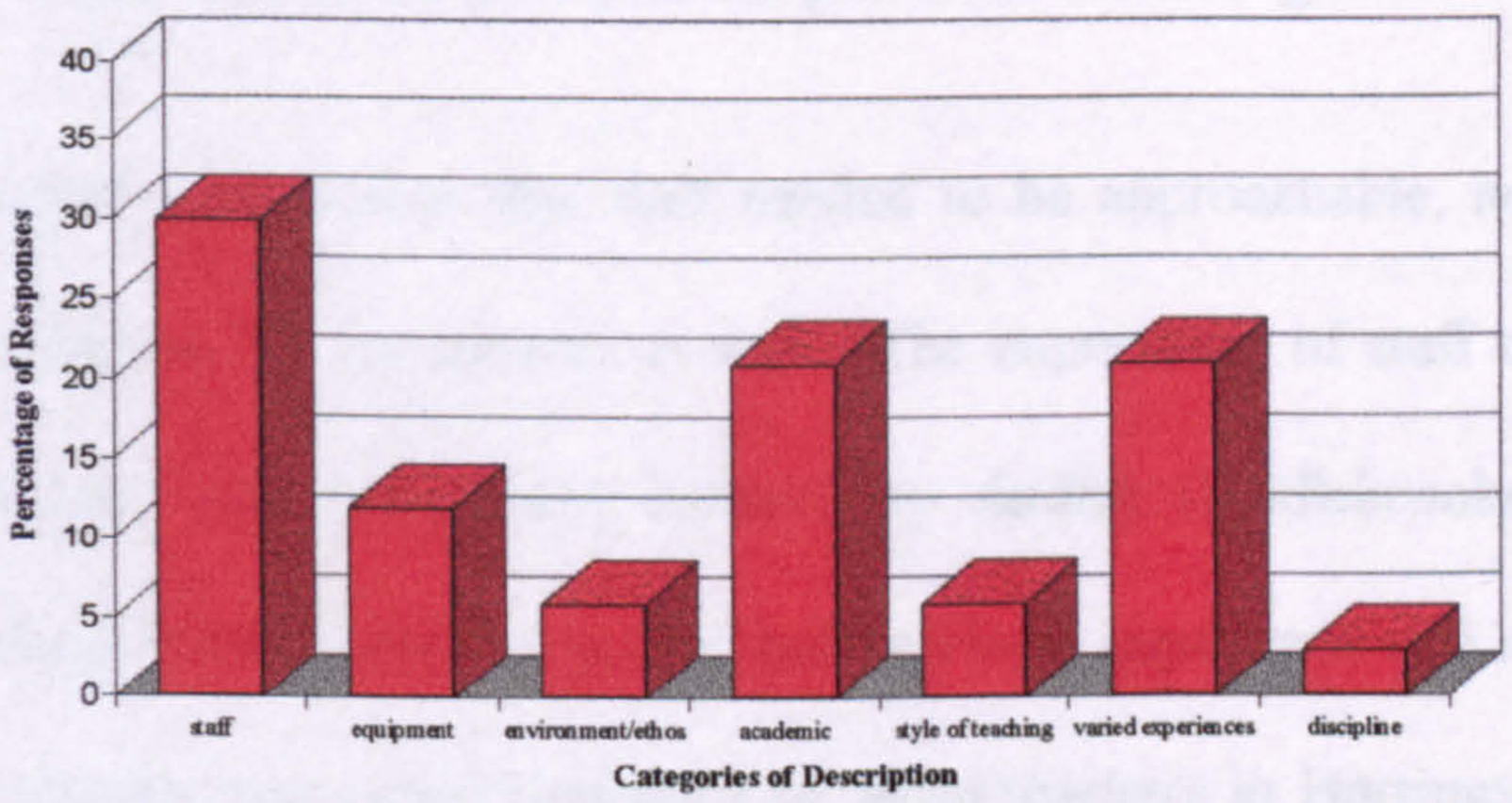
I identified seven qualitatively different ways (categories of description) in which the participating parents perceived 'quality' in nursery education and have labelled these as follows:-

- staff
- equipment
- environment/ethos
- academic
- style of teaching
- varied experiences

- discipline

Figure 6.11 represents the '*flavour*' of what was said by the parents as a total sample.

Figure 6.11: Categories of Description Relating to Parents' Perceptions of 'Quality' in Nursery Education - Total Sample



Staff

This was the most frequently mentioned aspect of 'quality'. ***Jemma*** was the first to put forward her opinion in her group:

> *It's the teachers, definitely. I definitely think, you know ... it's just the way they are with them. If they're good teachers then it reflects in the children.*

Remember, for Jemma school had been a bad experience, and she stressed the significance of the teacher as being an important aspect of 'quality'. Her remark was echoed by ***George***:

> *Well, I think quality is in the teachers. If the quality of the teachers is right, then they will be able to bring the children on.*

Christine, (Catsbury) MAH, late thirties, three children, (20, 18 and 4 years) and a council tenant, had had experience of another nursery class

within the LEA. She talked of her daughter's difficulty in settling in the other class, attributing the problems to the personality of the teacher:

> *It's different 'ere. I mean, Mrs 'ughes is so sort of relaxed with them ... but at Bottomley Avenue the children were more disciplined, I mean really disciplined. They 'ad to ask if they could go outside. They 'ad to ask if they could paint. It's a lot different 'ere.*

Some parents mentioned that staff needed to be approachable, not only for the children but for parents as well. The importance of staff training for the right age group was stressed by ***Judith*** (Fiddlebrooke), but interestingly Fiddlebrooke's teacher had had least experience and training for the nursery age range compared to those teachers in Harrington and Catsbury. But, of course, the nursery nurse was trained (NNEB) and she was the person with whom parents had most contact (from my observations).

Parents in all schools mentioned staff/child ratios as being important and discussed problems of class size. These concerns may have been influenced by macrosystem factors in the form of media coverage which had highlighted the recent steady increase in class size.

The finding that parents associate 'quality' in nursery education with *staff* characteristics (training, ratios and personal qualities) is congruent with outcomes of recent studies using questionnaire surveys to assess parents' views on day care services (Vernon and Smith, 1994 [UK]; Karrby and Giota, 1995 [Sweden]; Barraclough and Smith, 1996 [NZ]; Folque and Siraj-Blatchford, 1996 [Portugal]). As mentioned in

Chapter Three, staff/child ratios were shown to be important indicators of 'quality' in child-care centres in the US (Howes, 1990). In another study (Howes et al., 1992) the importance of teacher behaviour in 'quality' day care centres is highlighted.

Academic skills and varied experiences

Some parents mentioned the learning of academic skills as being an aspect of 'quality' in nursery education. These opinions were contrasted by parents who thought that 'quality' in nursery education was the provision of many different experiences.

> *It's all of the different activities that they do. They do everything ... like cooking ... and they go outside to play.* (***Laura*** - Harrington)

Other foci of the discussions

Some parents talked of good quality, up-to-date equipment and a happy atmosphere. Others mentioned the importance of the style of teaching and learning.

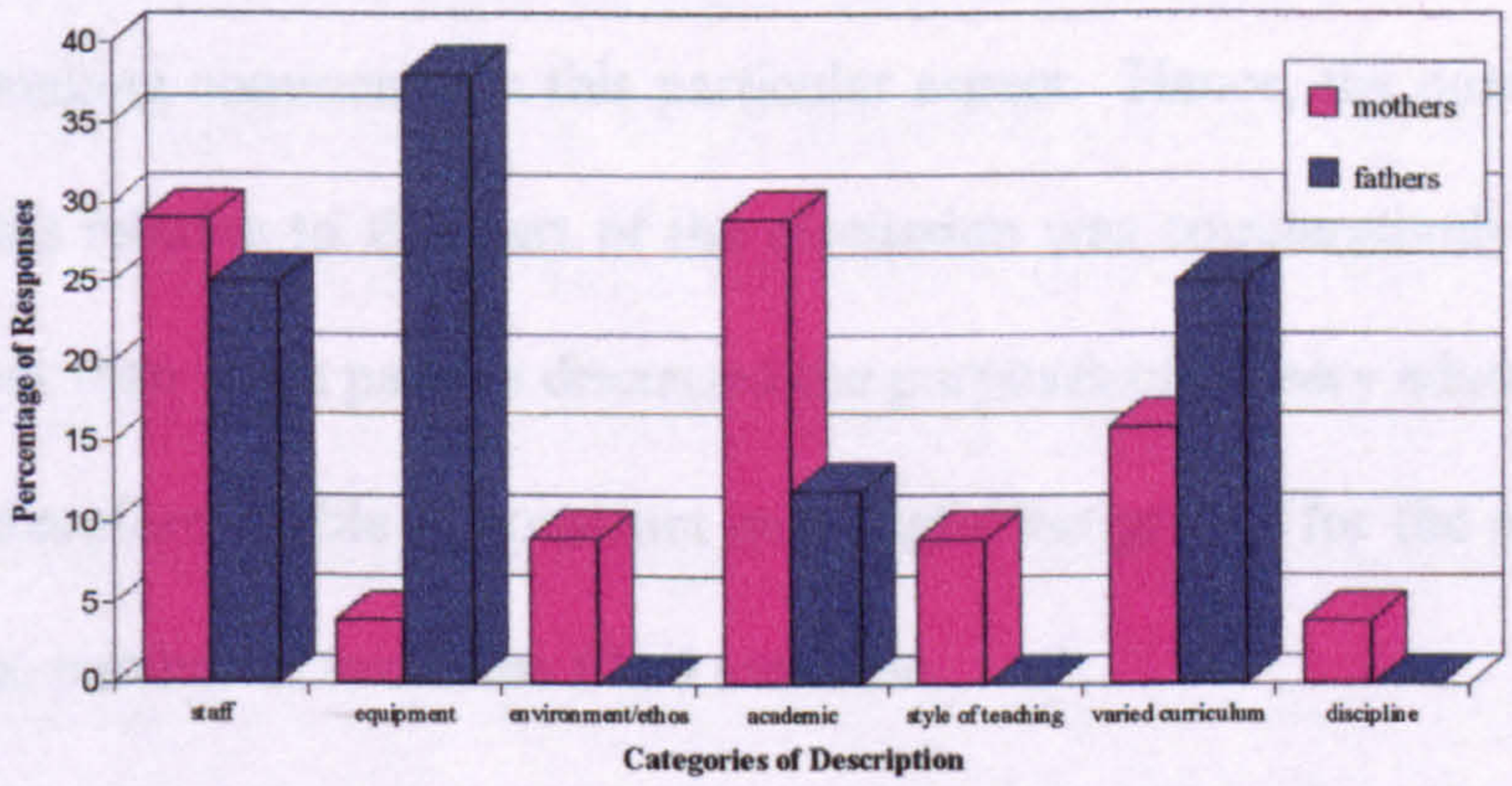
> *It's the indirectness of it which is very good about it. I think the quality is in the relaxed way of doing things.* (***Tara*** - Catsbury)

When defining 'quality', Tara was able to call on constructs developed through her long association with the nursery (five children), coupled with the experience of having helped in the classroom.

Comparisons across gender and social groups

When making comparisons between the responses of mothers and fathers regarding their perceptions of 'quality', some major differences are apparent. Whilst mothers discussed aspects of 'quality' within all seven categories of description, fathers' responses fell into only four. Fathers placed more emphasis on *equipment* than did mothers, and tended to stress a *variety of experiences*, whereas mothers stressed *academic* skills. Mothers and fathers placed similar emphasis on staffing. However, mothers emphasised the personality of the teacher and fathers stressed staff ratios. Figure 6.12 illustrates the foci of mothers' and fathers' discussions.

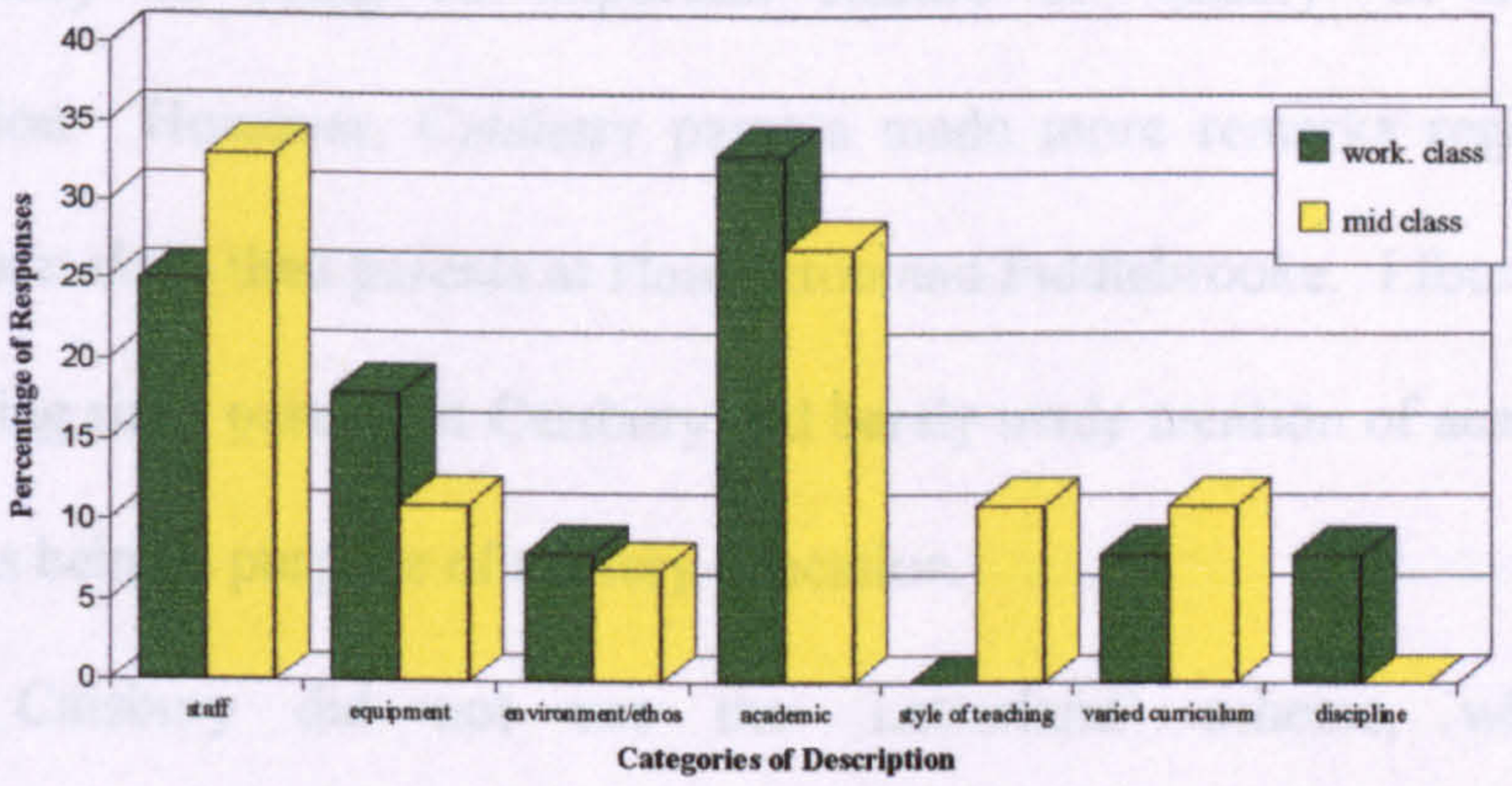
Figure 6.12: Categories of Description Relating to Parents' Perceptions of 'Quality' in Nursery Education by Gender Groups



If I now compare social groups, some differences in perceptions of 'quality' are again apparent. Two categories of description differed - only 'working-class' mothers mentioned *discipline* as a 'quality' indicator whereas only 'middle-class' mothers mentioned *style of teaching and*

learning. Figure 6.13 represents an overview of the discourses of 'working-class' and 'middle-class' parents.

Figure 6.13: Categories of Description Relating to Parents' Perceptions of 'Quality' in Nursery Education by Social Class



Comparing perceptions of 'quality' in the different settings

As I mentioned earlier, my question on 'quality' seemed to cause a momentary silence in the groups. Mothers and fathers were very cautious about making comments on this particular aspect. Hence, the number of text units relating to this part of the discussion was comparatively small, far fewer than when parents discussed the purposes of nursery education. I was therefore unable to construct meaningful bar graphs for the settings with the number of text units I had available.

At **Harrington** parents did not mention *style of teaching and learning* as an indicator of 'quality', but did place emphasis on *staff personality and ratios, equipment* and *varied experiences*. From my observations, staff appeared very friendly in their interactions with parents and children, and, as illustrated in Chapter Four, there was a huge variety of equipment in the classroom. However, this was the only school in

which *discipline* was mentioned (I observed much rough and tumble). At **Fiddlebrooke** parents gave equal weight to *staff* and a *variety of experiences*, whilst at **Catsbury** parents placed much emphasis on *staff personality* as being an important feature of 'quality' in nursery education. However, Catsbury parents made more remarks regarding *academic skills* than parents at Harrington and Fiddlebrooke. I found this surprising since parents at Catsbury had barely made mention of academic skills as being a purpose of nursery education.

Catsbury did not use the 'Letterland' scheme, whereas Fiddlebrooke and Harrington did. At Catsbury children had much informal experience of print, but did not actually sit down and learn letters and numbers.

Adjusting my microscope: taking a closer look at context

I now find myself making a closer examination of the discussions at Catsbury, looking at each focus group as an *event* within a temporal and situational context. It was within the group discussion between the more 'vociferous' mothers that most emphasis was placed on the acquisition of academic skills as being associated with 'quality' in nursery education (hence, the majority of the text units from Catsbury relating to academic skills came from this group). But I will now consider a more in-depth exploration of the context in which the discussion took place.

There had been an announcement on the television news, the evening before the group met, concerning the issue of vouchers for all

parents of four-year-old children. The mothers came to the meeting wanting to air their views on the subject. ***Daphne*** (Catsbury, married, MAH, two children (9 and 4 years) and a council tenant), and ***Elizabeth*** (described above), were somewhat enraged by a situation which they felt was unfair and which they thought might endanger the existence of their nursery class. ***Elizabeth*** expressed her frustration. She was a cleaner for a middle-class couple who sent their children to a private nursery school and these children were being taught to read and write. She therefore witnessed, what seemed to her, an advantage being given to these children compared to her own children. The following 'scene' illustrates the frustration Elizabeth feels about her children not being able to get on as well as those of her employers, and also how her views may have influenced the focus of the group discussion.

* * *

We are sitting in the home corner which is situated in the corridor outside the classroom, and which the children are unable to use as the door is closed. *Elizabeth* is sitting on my right. She is a small woman in her late thirties, with a Mediterranean appearance (dark, short, curled hair, and olive skin), wearing a white blouse and floral skirt. *Daphne* is sitting diagonally opposite Elizabeth so that the two women have to speak across the group. She is also of small stature, with mousy brown, straight shoulder-length hair, and wearing grey jog-suit bottoms and a grey T-shirt. We have been talking about other forms of pre-school provision when the discussion turns to private nursery education. Other participants in the room, myself, Anita and Christine, are unable to break into the first part of the discussion. We take on the role of spectators, rather like those at a tennis match.

Eliz: (leaning forward) *The only thing is they* [her employers] ***pay for their children to go to nursery school and they can read. See, there's a lot of difference, really. They read and they write.***

Daph: (sitting back in her chair, cross-legged) *Well, I can't understand 'ow they get 'em to sit down and do it at that age.*
Eliz: *They're paying privately for their education, aren't they.*
Daph: (leaning forward and shaking her index finger) *Yeah, but 'ow do they teach 'em at that age?*
Eliz: *Well I don't know, ... but they're ahead of ours .... which is 'ard, isn't it? You know what I mean ... it's just ....*
Daph: (leaning forward further towards Elizabeth and uncrossing her legs) *But the idea is with ours is that once they're 'appy ... once they start to learn, then they'll catch up.*
Eliz: *I don't think they do actually.*
Daph: (falling back into her chair again, folding her arms and recrossing her legs) *To be honest I dunno whether they do ... but that's the logic behind it. I don't think you should take a baby ... a child, and sit 'em down ... at three and half or four ... and make 'em learn because sometimes you can go the other way. I don't know. You got to make it so they want to learn.*
Eliz: *But they do.*
Daph: *But you can put 'em off.*
Eliz: *Oh, no. I wish I could pay for private. I do, cos those type of children will always get on.*
Daph: (leaning forward, and shaking her index finger again) *But it comes down to the same thing. If you've got money, you'll always have money.*
Eliz: (leaning forward and pointing her index finger) *Their education is far above the state education. They know what they want.*
Daph: *It should be the same, yeah.*
Eliz: *Our children should be allowed to get on as much as their children. I just don't think it's fair that a child can go into private education, a private nursery, and then go on to another private education and they can read and start, and ours know nothin'. I just think there's a law for one and a law for another.*
Daph: *Yeah, course there is. You got money or you ain't.*
She leans back in her chair, crosses her legs and folds her arms.

Fifteen minutes later

Pauline: *Right. I've got a big question for you now ladies. What would you say is meant by 'quality' in nursery education? ..... What for you is quality nursery education?*

... (pause) ... *Have a think for a moment or two.*

(pause)

Daph: *I would say truthfully ... to start knowing their letters and things.*
Eliz: (leaning forward) *Thank you. I was ...*
Daph: (interrupting and leaning forward in her chair) *Just to start ... the basics ... just to start before they go into reception class. They could begin by learning 'em the alphabet.*
Eliz: *Well mine knows the alphabet cos I taught 'er. She can write some letters. But that's only because I've sat down and taught 'er.*
Anita: *My kid's ready to learn 'er letters.*
Eliz: *I must admit. I would like 'em to do that, I would like that.*
Anita: *Say the term before they go up to school, then I think they should say, 'Well this is what we're going to do today', and sit 'em down and do it.*
Daph: *The trouble is they can't, can they? They've got too many of 'em.*
Chris: *But they could have a little group of 'em.*

* * *

The discussion became very emotional. Besides expressing their feelings of what they perceive to be inequality of opportunity for their children, the women stress that one type of provision is for one group of people and another for another group. Daphne, however, had helped in the classroom, and this experience is evident in her attempts to defend the informal learning methods used. Bernstein (1977) contends that the 'invisible pedagogy' has its origins in the middle class, and that for working-class parents the 'visible pedagogy is immediately understandable' (p.522), for:

> The basic competencies which it is transmitting of reading, writing, and counting, in an ordered explicit sequence, make sense (p.522).

Daphne's (council tenant) familiarity with the invisible pedagogy employed in the classroom at Catsbury, had enabled her to understand its philosophies. However, she contradicts herself by suggesting that 'quality' is about learning letters and numbers.

Elizabeth's experience at work may have impacted on the group discussion, causing other mothers to make comments about academic skills. I suggest perceptions may have been developing within the group itself. Participants might possibly leave the discussion with broadened or different perspectives from those with which they came, due to the attitudes and opinions of other participants in the group. As I suggested earlier, perhaps the focus group could be considered as a 'mini-microsystem'. *Exosystem* features, in the form of Elizabeth's experiences at work, were impacting upon the discussion, as were *macrosystem* features, media coverage and socio-cultural group.

'Missing' attributes?

Perceptions of 'quality' may be affected by attributes of the microsystem (nursery class), both positively and negatively. Whilst parents expressed their satisfaction with the nursery class their children were attending and mentioned some 'quality' indicators which they felt were present, they also pointed out features which were not present. For example, at Harrington some mothers mentioned *discipline* as a feature of 'quality'

and talked of some discipline problems in the classroom. As I discussed earlier, some parents at Catsbury stressed academic skills when no *formal* learning of these skills was taking place. Parents at Fiddlebrooke mentioned varied experiences as being an indicator of 'quality', and yet the children's experiences seemed to be restricted. I found similar patterns in my findings in previous research into parents' perceptions of the qualities of good primary schools (Evans, 1993), with parents giving high ratings to features which were absent in their schools. For example, parents in those schools which had buildings which were in poor condition, placed more emphasis on the condition of buildings, than those whose children's schools were in a good state of repair. Were parents using the research process as a forum for complaint? Elizabeth highlighted her exasperation at not being able to express her opinions by saying at the close of the discussion:

> *Thank you for listening to us. No one ever listens to us.*

'Quality' is for 'Others'

Interestingly, not only were parents expressing 'quality' in terms of that which was missing, some equated the concept with that which was unattainable for them; for example ***Christine*** commented:

> *But what we should realise is that we have to have what we get.*

This somewhat fatalistic attitude was echoed by ***Tara***:

> *I think we're there with this nursery. I don't think ... unless you paid for one of these Montessori-type nurseries ... um ... I think*

> ***we're there with what we can expect before they start school.***

Here I refer again to Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (1992, p.223), discussed in Chapter Two, and which was also apparent in the dialogue between Daphne and Elizabeth. These women seem to demonstrate an embodied sense of their place (Reay, 1996), which may restrict their ability, and power, to gain what *they consider* to be 'quality' nursery education.

The fact that parents associate paying for education with 'quality' as stressed by ***Elizabeth*** in her dialogue with ***Daphne***, and by ***Tara*** above, was also highlighted by ***Jane*** when talking about the private nursery she had used for a short time while working:

> *You're paying for it, so you expect the good things.*

Is 'quality' in nursery education therefore perceived to be something for which you have to pay? Perhaps, if I had not used the word 'quality' and instead asked parents what they thought was *good* nursery education, would different opinions have been voiced? I suggest that parents may automatically conduct an assessment exercise on the institution their children attend when asked to define 'quality'. What seems apparent is that parents may call upon a different set of constructs when defining 'quality' in nursery education than when putting forward their ideas on the purposes of nursery education.

Parents' opinions on the voucher system

Towards the end of the group sessions, I asked parents for their views on the voucher system which was due to be introduced by the Conservative Government. The scheme had been abolished at the time of my writing this thesis, but I justify discussing it here since issues regarding parental choice in nursery education were raised. Details of the scheme had not been announced via the media when I spoke to parents at Harrington, and so I had to explain about its introduction. The scheme was announced on television during the evening before I met the first group of parents at Catsbury. Parents at Fiddlebrooke had had some time to consider the implications by the time they were interviewed.

The majority of parents were against the introduction of vouchers, and did not feel that the scheme would do anything to improve their choice in education.

> ***Eliz:*** *We're supposed to 'ave freedom of choice. What a load of rubbish.*
> ***Daph:*** *Freedom of choice? We've got no bloody freedom of choice .... I mean I should be able to send 'er where I want to send 'er.*

Rosemary and ***Tricia***, both single parents and council tenants, worried that if their nursery class closed, they would not be able to get their children to any other nursery.

> *They talk about choice, but it's people like one parent families that won't be able to make a choice.* (***Rosemary***)

Some parents raised concerns over the impact the voucher system might have on the 'quality' of provision.

> *But another thing that worries me is, if all these private nurseries start setting up, what sort of quality are we going to have? If they're not doing the job properly, what will happen? Will they be trained? I mean, in playgroups you've got trained playworkers, but they're not trained teachers.* (***Jeff***)

An interesting feature of the short discussion on vouchers was that fathers, who had been quite reserved up to this point, began to contribute more comments, and seemed much more relaxed. Was the change in the men's behaviour due to the move in the discussion towards a political issue? Recent research (Coates, 1996) indicates that whereas women discuss personal and family matters when in a group, men prefer to take on 'expert' roles and discuss such things as politics. Perhaps these practices were reflected in the focus group discussions, mothers talking freely about their children and their nursery education, whilst fathers were happier discussing political issues.

Other matters arising

Some other topics came up in discussion which I consider relevant to the study. Since parents in the first focus group at Harrington mentioned that their children were always talking to them about what they did in nursery, I included a question which probed this issue in the other groups. Whilst parents in all the groups at Harrington and Catsbury said their children

did talk about nursery class experiences, those at Fiddlebrooke said that their children did not. ***Sue***, mid-thirties, married, MAH, four children (6, 4 and 3 years, and 11 months) and a homeowner, and ***Pat*** gave typical answers:

> ***Sue:*** *Not a lot really .. not a lot .. no.*
> ***Pat:*** *No, not often. I think it's because she's so filled up with everything and gets quite tired.*

All that parents did mention was that their children talked about the 'Letterland' scheme. This scheme was mentioned briefly by parents at Harrington, but they did not say that their children talked about it. It may be that certain patterns of behaviour within the different microsystems were influential in these differing responses. These issues are discussed in Chapter Eight.

One last interesting aspect arose from the focus group meetings - the issue of parents' 'voice' in their children's education. A few parents at Fiddlebrooke said they would like more involvement in their children's nursery class experience. ***Judith*** (Fiddlebrooke - chairperson of the local playgroup) said she felt particularly isolated, and would like to know more about what happened in the classroom. All the parents interviewed at Fiddlebrooke were 'middle-class'. These parents did have a voice via the research process, but those from lower socio-economic groups were stifled. I remind the reader that Beatrice (nursery teacher at Fiddlebrooke) considered that parents were happy for her to take control of their children.

Daphne (Catsbury), whilst happy with the situation in the nursery class, was unhappy about her ability to have a 'voice' in her son's education further up the school. She felt that *some* parents were almost running the school. ***Christine*** agreed with her:

> ***Daphne:*** *That's the privates again, runnin' round poking their cherries where they shouldn't be.*
> ***Christine:*** *I know, they organise things.*
> ***Daphne:*** *You don't get a look in, you know. If I come up 'ere and say something, they don't take any notice.*

I remind the reader that the headteachers at Catsbury and Harrington said that, whilst all parents showed great interest in their children at nursery level, this interest declined in some groups of parents as their children moved through the school. But does interest wane, or is teacher attitude such that parents feel ill at ease in school? Vincent (1996) indicates that working-class parents in her study perceived that they were 'politely patronised by the teachers, and kept at a distance' (p.476). Sociological discourses relating to research into issues of power and home-school relationships have 'failed to engage the teaching profession' (Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997, p.371). Vincent and Tomlinson (1997) suggest some teacher attitudes found in Vincent's (1996) study are congruent with those found in a study by Lawrence Green some *30 years* earlier. Grimes (1995, 1997) illustrates the division which occurred between groups of parents in a multicultural school in which supposedly liberal, White, middle-class parents attempted to use their power to influence an issue arising out of cultural difference. What seems apparent in my research, is

that two *parent cultures* may exist even in 'all-white' schools which I suggest may set in motion a cycle of discontent and apathy amongst parents from lower socio-economic groups. Bourdieu (1977) in relation to *children* in school, maintains:

> ...the negative predispositions towards school which result in the self-elimination of most children from the most culturally unfavoured classes and sections of class - such as self-depreciation, devaluation of the school and its sanctions, or a resigned attitude to failure and exclusion - must be understood as an anticipation, based upon the unconscious estimation of the objective probabilities of success possessed by the whole category, of the sanctions objectively reserved by the school for those classes or sections of a class deprived of cultural capital (p.495).

Such a notion might also be applied to parents.

Summary and discussion

The focus group interview proved a useful technique for gaining an understanding of mothers' and fathers' perceptions and opinions. The relaxed atmosphere during the discussions *seemed* to me to empower parents who *might* have been inhibited in voicing their opinions if they had been subjected to individual interviews. Parents appeared to enjoy the discussions, exemplified by ***Yvette's*** comments at the end of her group interview. She seemed rather aggressive at the start of the interview, asking how long it would take, and saying that she could not stay for more than half an hour. However, she stayed for the duration of the interview session (80 minutes in total), and commented, 'That was good, that was. Can we do it again?'

This chapter perhaps highlights the dynamic nature of perceptions which may be influenced over time, not only by the microsystem and the broader social context, but also by the research process itself - the focus groups were microsystems in which perceptions were developing.

In defining 'quality', mothers and fathers seemed to call upon a different set of constructs from those used to describe the purposes of nursery education, some parents making obviously contradictory statements. Such a finding should not call into question the 'validity' or 'reliability' of my research, but perhaps emphasises trustworthiness. I have not ignored or abandoned the contradictions as being 'untrue', for they illustrate lack of sameness and irregularity, highlighting 'multiplicity and difference' (Scheurich, 1996, p.56). That multiplicity and difference can be seen as acknowledging the *individual*, fostering heterogeneity, and encompassing a postmodernist stance of a 'situated, partial, positioned, explicit, tentativeness' (Lather, 1993, p.685).

Concluding thoughts

I was there. And I am here now writing this, with all my baggage strapped on my back. I have found myself to be emotionally involved with some of my participants, in much the same way as one might empathise with a character in a play. I have worried over how to present my participants' voices as a text, particularly regarding accents, fearing that some may consider them to be 'inarticulate'. Should I have

presented what they said as they said it, or act as some kind of 'interpreter' so as to make them speak in 'middle-class mode'?

I am aware that using phenomenographic analysis removes my participants and myself from the discourse; it obliterates the 'polyphonic' chorus. However, Marton's (1981) notion that there are a *limited number of qualitatively different ways* in which we perceive aspects of the world may be illustrated in the study. Certainly parents perceive certain aspects of nursery education in a limited number of ways. But I have attempted to present what was said in different modes so that voices can be 'heard' and considered in context. My study does not purport to represent Parents' views, only *some* parents' views, situated in a certain place, at a certain time.

We have heard staff and parents talk about nursery education and considered their opinions. Now we move on to 'listen to' the children in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Seven

Children Talking About Nursery Education

Introduction

Firstly, I will begin by placing this part of my study within the context of the relevant literature to date. The children's responses will then be described together with some of *my own* interpretations. Some reflections on the interviewing technique developed for the study precedes a summary and discussion of the salient issues arising from this part of the research. Finally, I will offer some concluding thoughts.

Background

The Children Act 1989 emphasised the importance of listening to the child (Lansdown, 1994). Indeed, Davie and Galloway (1996a) highlight an increasing awareness amongst professionals of the notion that 'children's views and perspectives need to be heard both as an ethical imperative and also as a matter of practical utility and efficacy' (p.3). Others maintain that we should consider young children as citizens (Moss and Penn, 1996), and perhaps incorporate the views of even the youngest children into their educational programmes and care routines (Pugh and Selleck, 1996). Since Bronfenbrenner (1979) maintains that the perceptions individuals hold of their environment influence their cognitive, social and emotional development, obtaining young children's perceptions of their educational environment must be considered important.

Interviewing the children

The problems associated with interviewing young children, and the technique I developed specifically for the study, are discussed in Chapter Two. In the three classes I visited during the last phase, I set up the telephone apparatus on an activity table in the classroom. The nursery teachers explained to the children that I had come to talk to them about their nursery, and that if they wanted to speak to me they could do so using the telephones. No pressure was placed on any of the children to

take part; I just sat at the table, waiting for my 'catch'. The majority of the children present in each class came forward to be interviewed (89% at Harrington (N=24), 87.5% at Catsbury (N=21), and rather less, 66% (N=15) at Fiddlebrooke). Unfortunately, at Fiddlebrooke I was unable to use an activity table placed in a prominent position in the classroom, as at Harrington and Catsbury, but was placed in a corner of the 'work' area (see classroom plan on page 160a). Therefore the children had to make a positive effort to access the interviewing table. The result was that fewer children came forward to be interviewed at Fiddlebrooke than at Harrington and Catsbury. At Harrington, so many children wanted to take part at the start of the session that they had to be directed away to other activities by the nursery teacher. At the start of each interview I let the children watch the dials move on the tape recorder as they spoke. In this way they were made fully aware of the fact that their voices were being recorded.

Whilst the children and I had fairly open conversations, I encouraged them to speak about *three main* aspects of their nursery education:-

- their reasons for attending nursery class;
- what they liked about their nursery class;
- what they disliked about their nursery class.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, I tried to reduce my power by putting the children into the role of an expert. The following extract from one interview attempts to illustrate the protocol I used.

> ***Pauline:*** *Hello. Who am I speaking to?*
> ***Gemma:*** *Gemma.*
> ***Pauline:*** *Oh, hello Gemma. How are you today?*
> ***Gemma:*** *All right.*
> ***Pauline:*** *Gemma, I think you might be able to help me .... You see I would like to know why you come to nursery; ..... I don't know ..... it's quite hard. Let's have a think together.*
>
> (pause)
>
> ***Gemma:*** *Um ... I think I come because I'm four and all four-year-olds come to nursery.*
> ***Pauline:*** *Because you're four ....oh right, thank you, Gemma. That's really helpful.*
>
> (continued)

Children may assume that adults know everything and will therefore know the correct answers to questions (Hatch, 1990; Bull, 1992). However, by suggesting that I did not know why Gemma attends nursery class, but that perhaps Gemma might know, I attempted to empower her; Gemma was the one who actually experienced coming to nursery, whereas I did not.

Children's perceptions of why they attend nursery class

As a result of my analysis of the transcripts, seven categories of description emerged relating to children's perceptions of *why* they attend nursery class. I arranged these seven categories of description into a

hierarchy, ranging from what might be considered as adult-imposed reasons for their attendance through to reasons which might be of benefit to themselves, as follows :-

- **domestic** - children attend for domestic reasons such as their mothers going to work; for example:

  Bethan (Harrington)*: Cos if I don't come to school, I have to go to me nanny's.*

- **conforming** - children attend because they are expected to at their age or because they have to come to school; for example:

  Kate (Catsbury)*: Because I 'ave to come because it's school day.*

- **self-gratifying** - children attend because they like nursery class; for example:

  Anna (Catsbury)*: Because I like it.*

- **play** - children attend so that they can play; for example:

  Richard (Harrington)*: I come to play every day.*

- **practical** - children attend so that they can take part in certain activities; for example:

  Darren (Fiddlebrooke)*: I come to do some painting.*

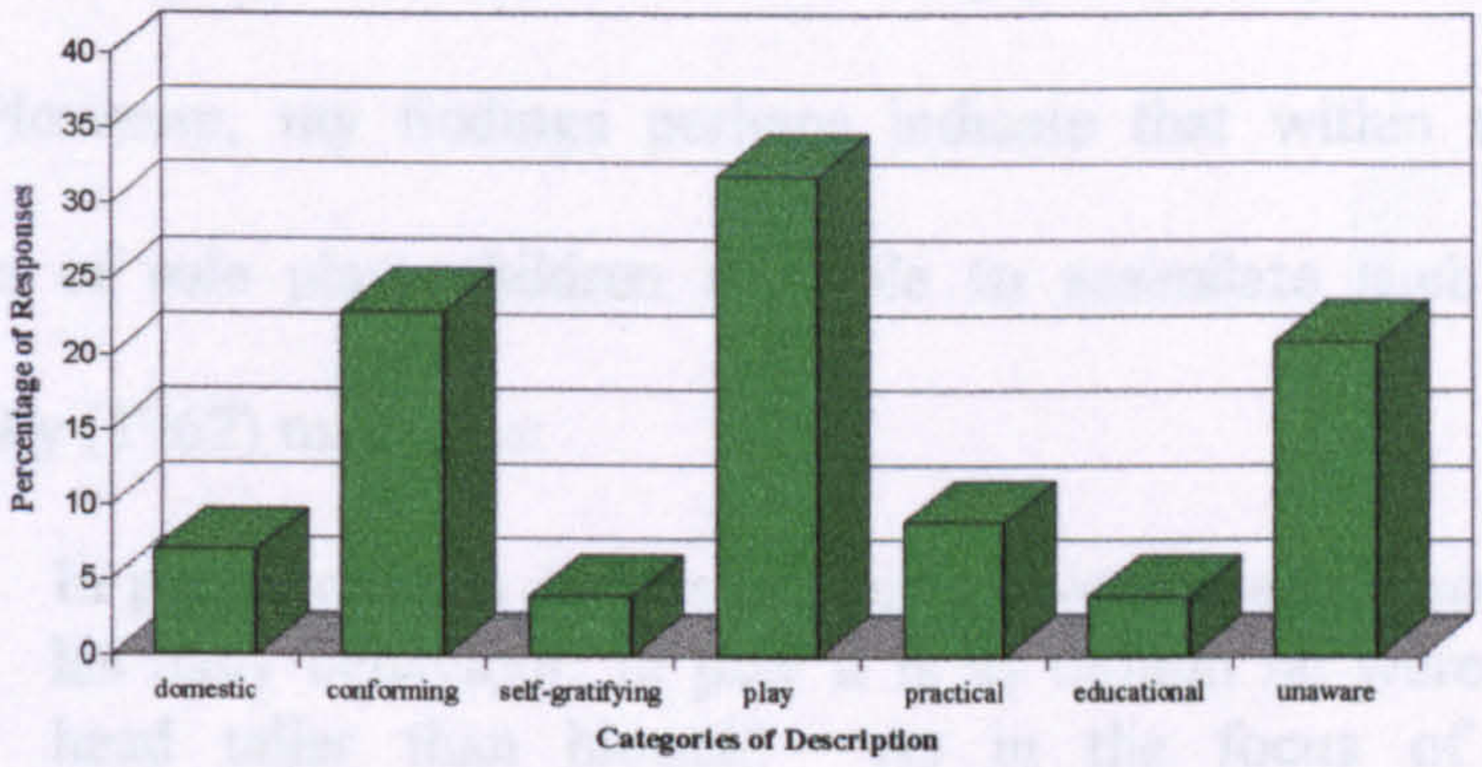
- **educational** - children attend so that they can learn things;

  James (Harrington)*: Um ... to teach us?*

- **unaware** - children do not know why they attend nursery class.

I calculated the percentage of children in the total sample making responses within each category of description.(see Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1: Categories of Description Relating to Children's Perceptions of Why They Attend Nursery Class



Play was the most frequently mentioned reason for attending nursery class by children in the total sample. However, I did not probe in order to amplify children's responses, fearing that the interview session might be too lengthy. A few children said that they came to play with certain items in the nursery. No children mentioned that they came to play with other children (in which case the reason could have been considered as social). More research involving more detailed interviewing might attempt to explore young children's understanding of the concept of play.

Over 20% of the children gave responses in the 'conforming' category of description, with many children saying that they had to come to school. Did they equate school with learning? If so, they may have thought they were attending for educational reasons. Again, more research might explore young children's concepts of 'school'.

Interestingly, around 80% of the children interviewed were able to give me reasons for their attendance at nursery class. This percentage was surprisingly high considering the comparatively difficult nature of the

question. Steward et al. (1993) maintain that children are unable to answer a 'why' question (an abstract concept) until they are 5 or 6 years old. However, my findings perhaps indicate that within the relaxed medium of role play, children are able to assimilate such questions. Vygotsky (1967) maintains:

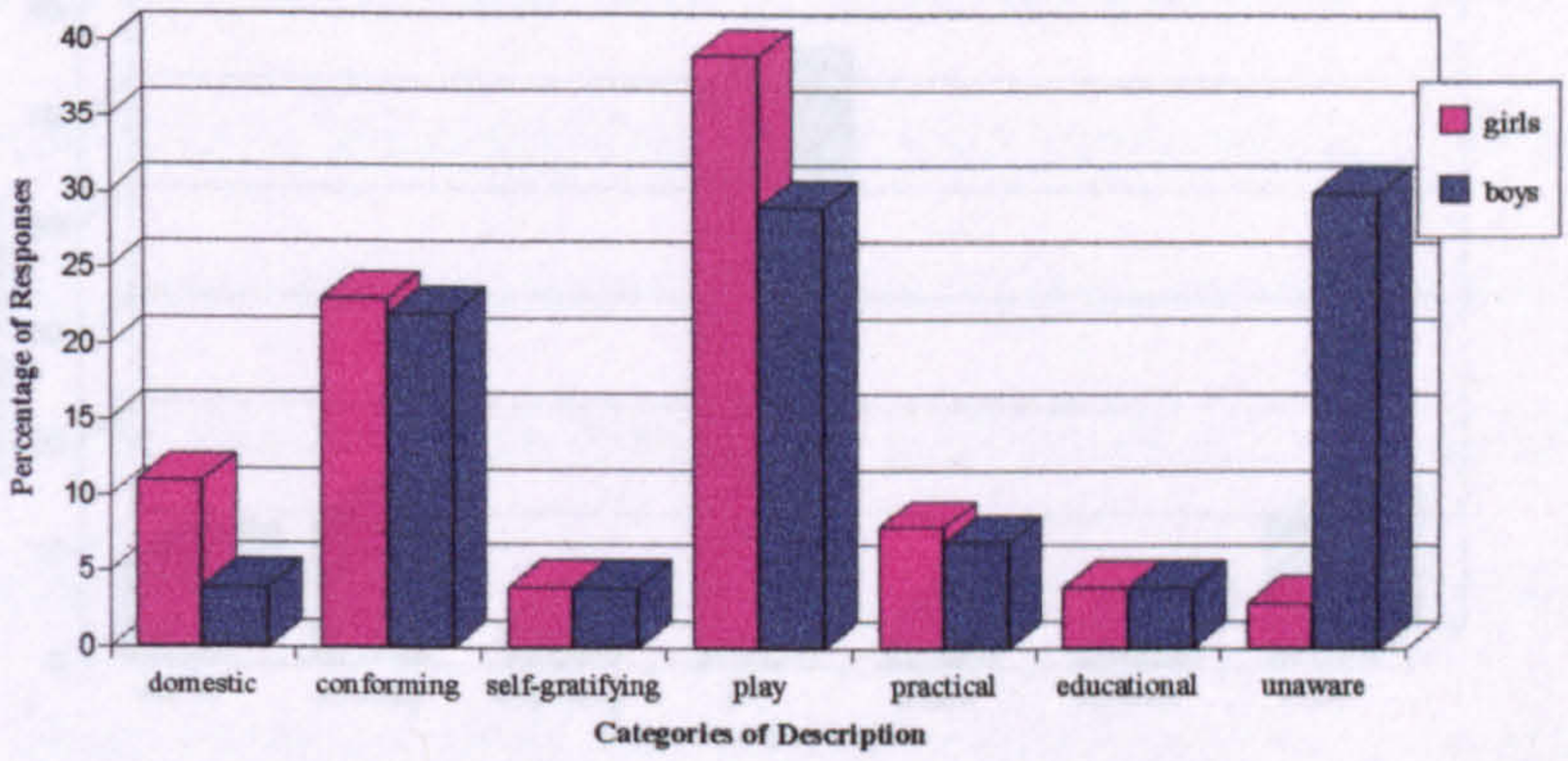
> In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour (p.16).

Perhaps the children operated at a higher cognitive level when involved in the telephone interview than they would during a standard interview. Such a notion warrants consideration through more research in which the telephone technique is compared with other methods of interviewing.

Gender differences in children's perceptions of why they attend nursery class

I explored the influence, if any, of gender on responses. Would boys and girls offer different reasons for their attendance at nursery? I conducted a matrix search within NUD.IST, intersecting the 'gender' node with the 'why' node and then counted responses in each cell. Figure 7.2 illustrates a comparison of responses offered by boys (N=31) and by girls (N=29).

Figure 7.2: Categories of Description Relating to Children's Perceptions of Why They Attend Nursery Class by Gender Groups



Whilst similar proportions of boys and girls gave reasons in the 'conforming', 'self-gratifying', 'practical' and 'educational' categories of description, proportionately more girls (11%) than boys (4%) gave responses in the 'domestic' category. Similarly, proportionately more girls (39%) than boys (29%) said that their reason for attendance was to play. Interestingly, although similar numbers of boys and girls came forward to be interviewed, a far greater proportion of boys (30%) than girls (3%) were unable to say why they attended nursery class. I tentatively suggest that girls' greater maturity in language development may have been responsible for their superior performance.

Children's perceptions of why they attend nursery class in the different settings

The next stage of my analysis involved the exploration of the extent to which these categories of description were represented in each setting. Therefore, the percentage of children in the sample in each setting making responses in each category of description was computed (see Figures 7.3, 7.4 and 7.5).

Figure 7.3: HARRINGTON

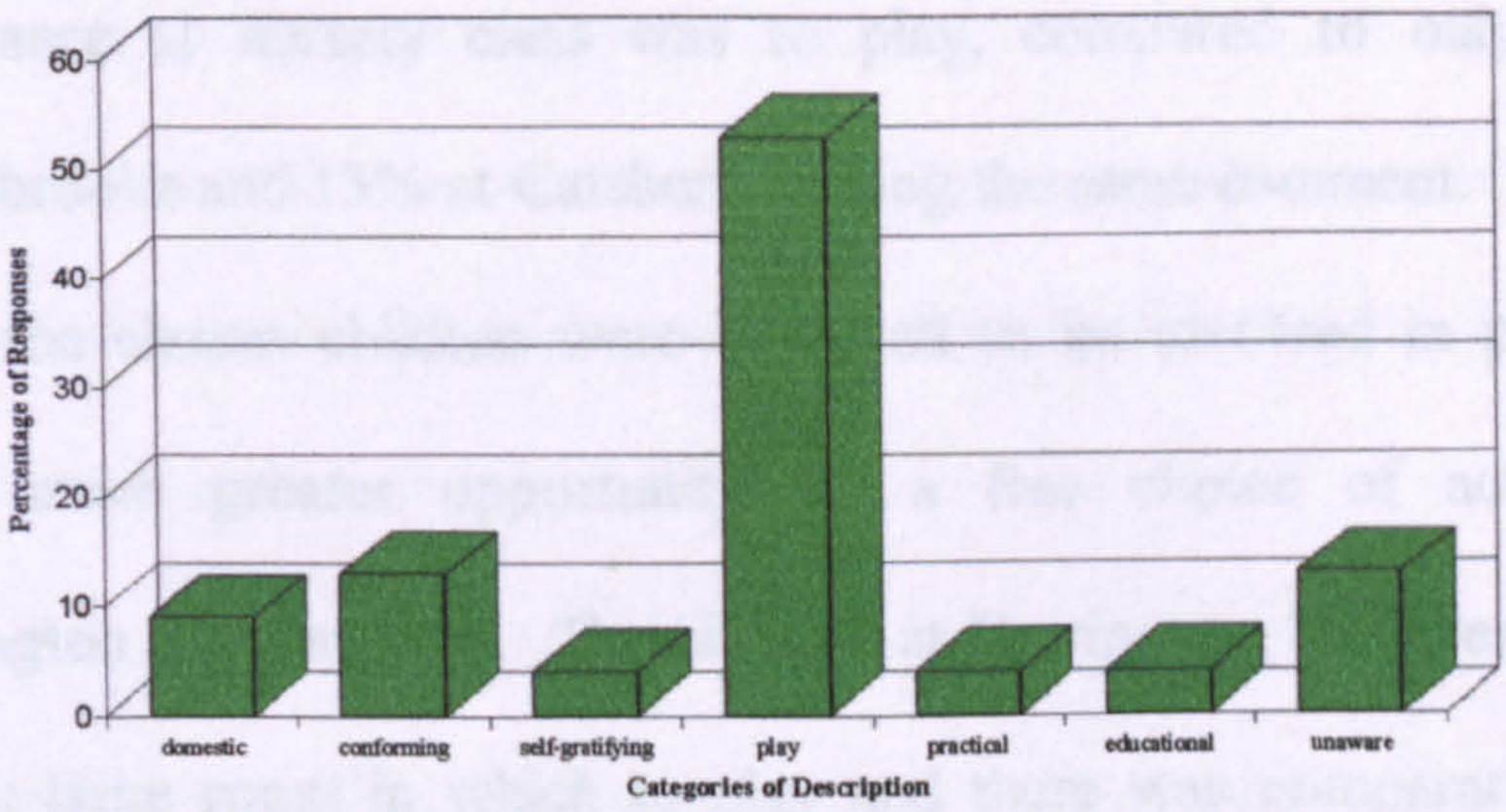


Figure 7.4: CATSBURY

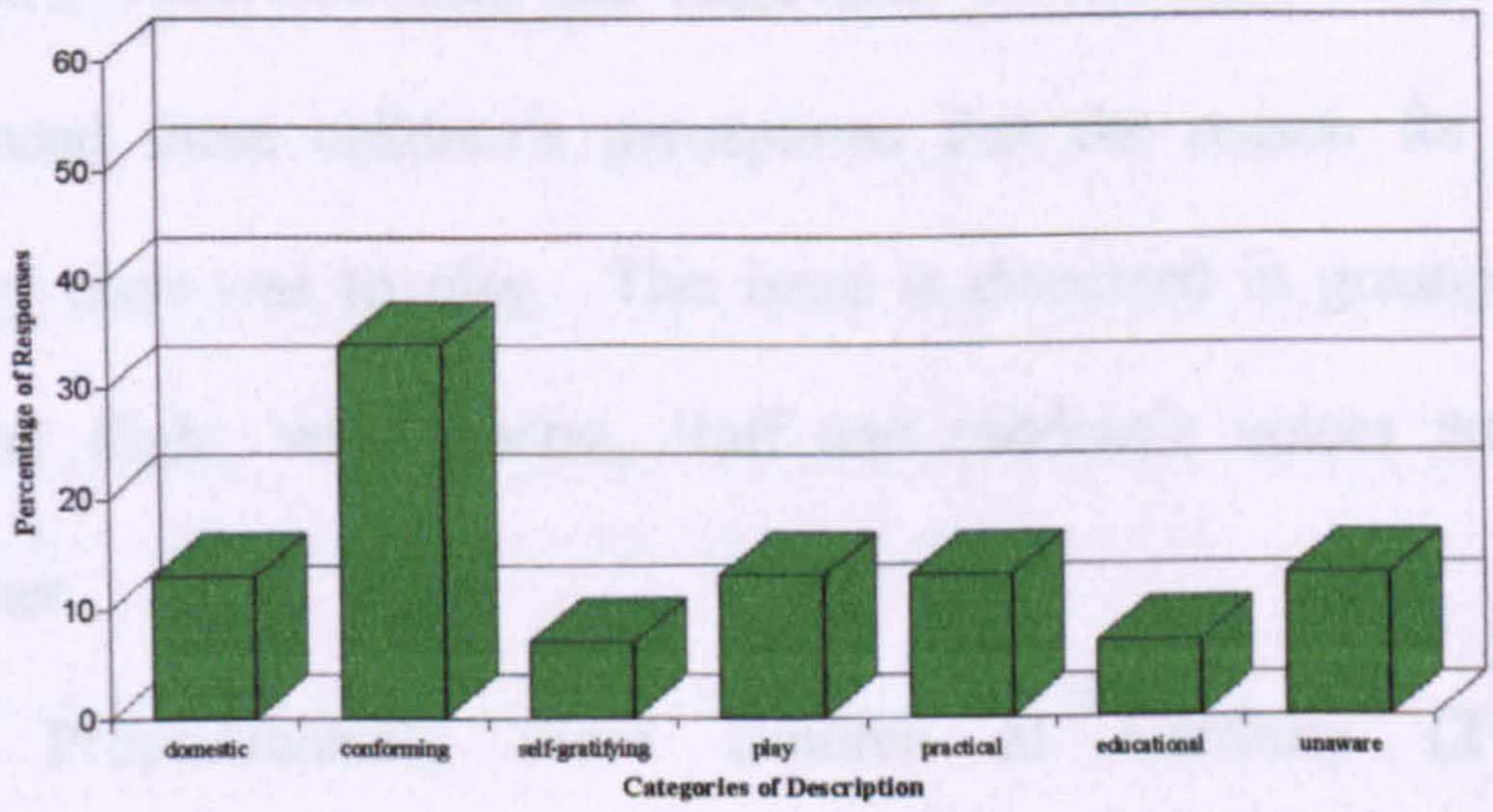
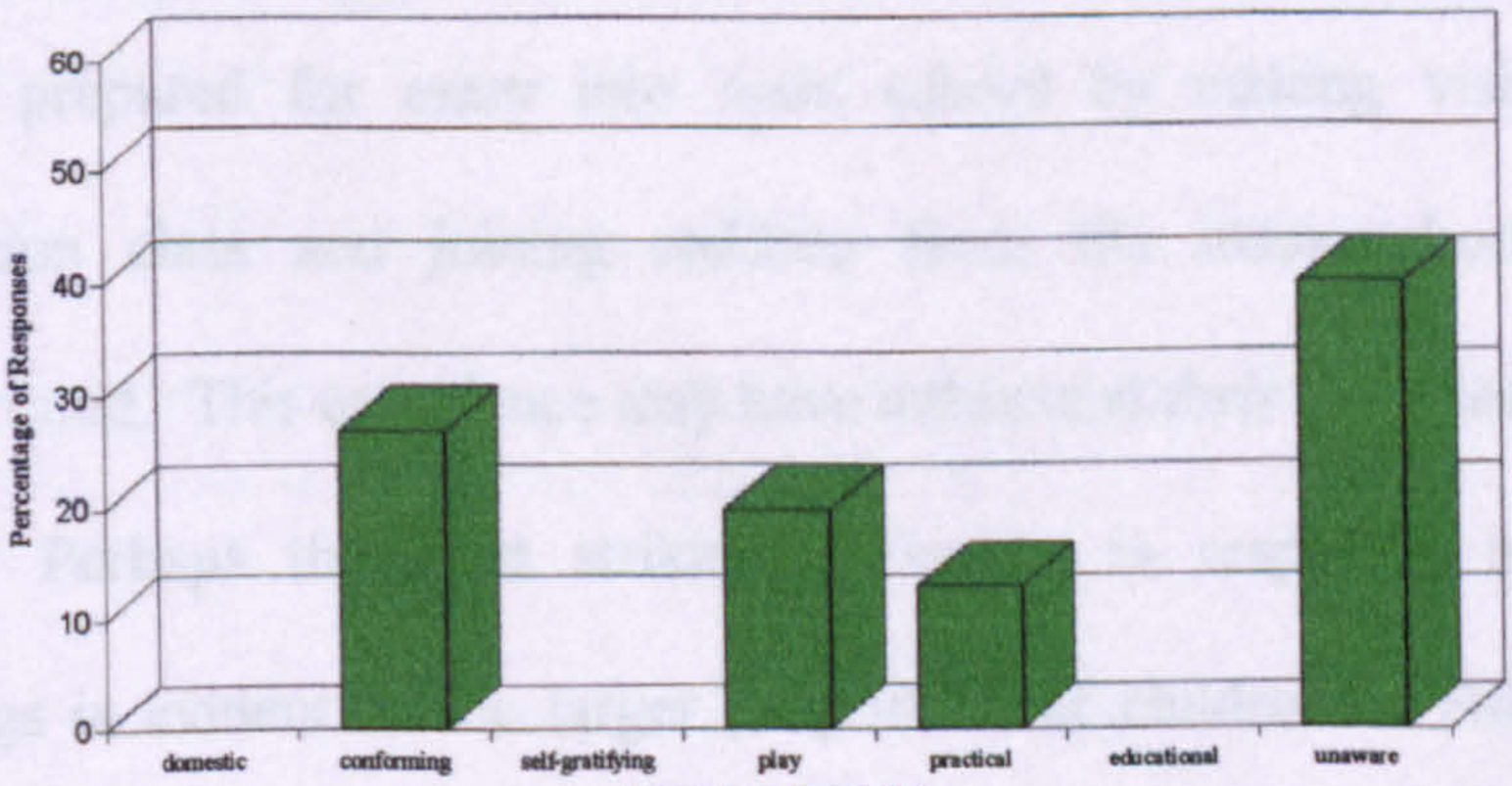


Figure 7.5: FIDDLEBROOKE



Over 50% of the children at Harrington stated that the reason for their attendance at nursery class was to play, compared to only 20% at Fiddlebrooke and 13% at Catsbury making the same comment. However, in all the classes children were observed to be involved in play, there being much greater opportunity for a free choice of activities at Harrington and Catsbury. The children at Harrington, however, did have a very large room in which to play and there was comparatively little adult intervention and support. The apparent lack of adult support and structure, combined with the large area of the classroom, may have influenced these children's perceptions that the reason for attending nursery class was to play. This issue is discussed in greater depth in Chapter Eight, when parent, staff and children's voices are brought together.

Proportionately more children at Catsbury (27%) and Fiddlebrooke (33%) than Harrington (13%) said they had to come to nursery class because it was school ('conforming' category). At the time of the visits to Catsbury and Fiddlebrooke, some of the children were being prepared for entry into main school by making visits to the reception class and joining children from the main school on the playground. This experience may have influenced their responses.

Perhaps the most striking difference in responses across the settings is evident in the larger proportion of children at Fiddlebrooke (40%) than at Harrington (13%) and Catsbury (13%) who did not know

why they attended nursery class. It seems appropriate to ask whether the differences in these children's ability to give reasons for their attendance at nursery class was a result of the influence of characteristics of the microsystem, such as teacher beliefs and pedagogical styles. I return to these issues in Chapter Eight.

What children like about their nursery class

All the children spoke of specific activities as being what they liked about their nursery class. Therefore I was able to create only *one* category of description - '*activities*'. However, I conducted further analysis creating *five* sub-categories of description relating to their likes as follows :-

- **gross-motor** - gross-motor activities such as climbing, bouncing, outdoor play, riding bicycles, PE etc., for example:

  Karen (Harrington)*: Um ... playing in the soft play.*

- **symbolic** - activities involving imaginative/pretend play i.e. socio-dramatic or with toys, for example:

  Rachel (Catsbury)*: Playing with the farm, I do.*

- **fluid-construction** - high sensori-motor activities involving the use of materials such as dough, paint, water, sand, crayons etc., for example:

  Molly (Fiddlebrooke)*: Um ... drawing and painting and .... um ...*

- **structural-construction** - activities involving the use of bricks, blocks, puzzles and other forms of construction/model making, for example:

  Darren (Fiddlebrooke)*: Yeah ... stickle bricks.*

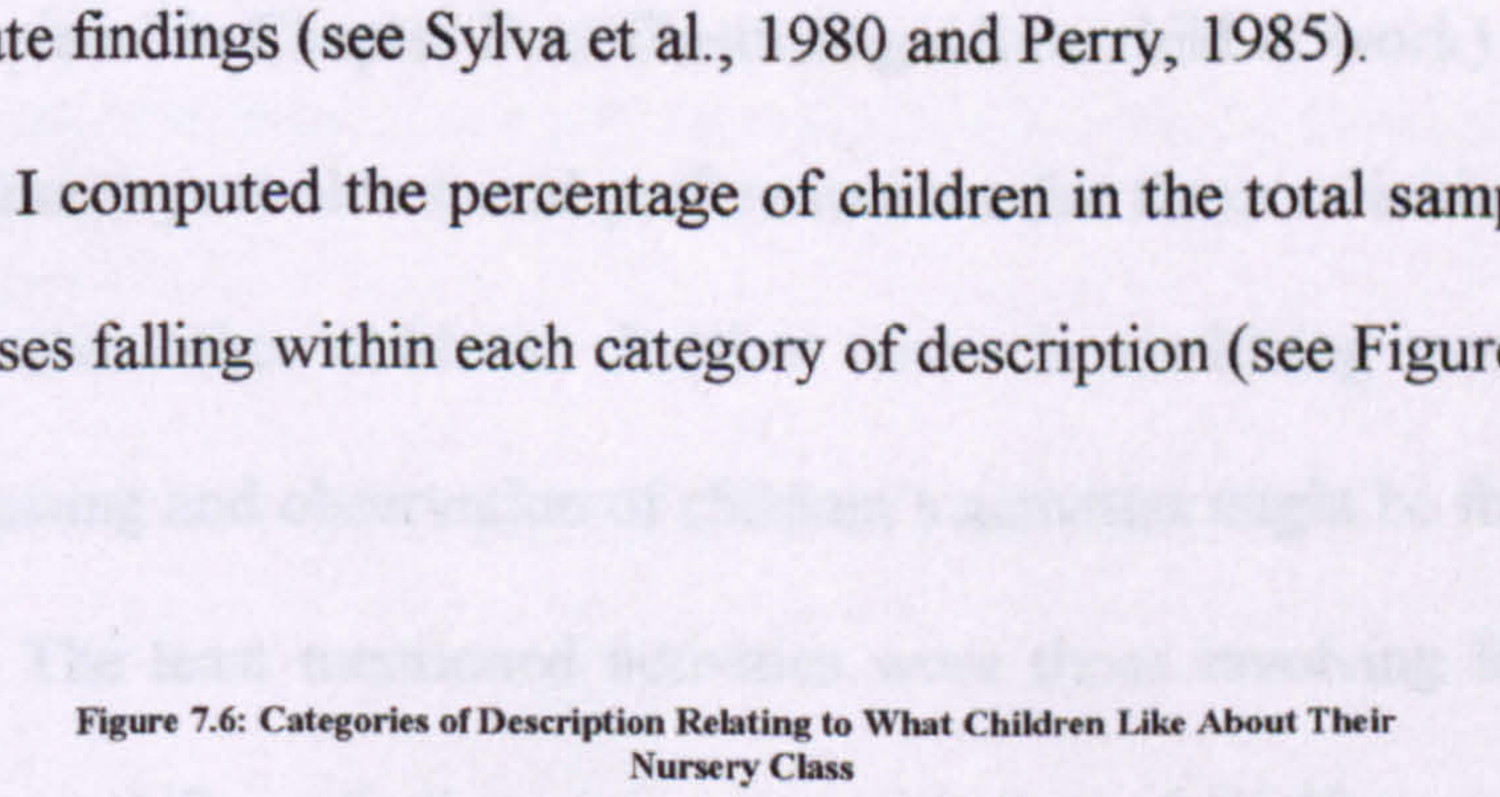
- **literacy/numeracy** - activities which involve the use of number/letter games, books, pre-writing skills etc.

Bethan (Harrington)*: I like it in the book corner.*

Although not intended at the outset of the categorisation, the five categories correspond closely to those given by Wolfgang and Phelps (1983) in their play materials inventory. Hence, the names I have given to three categories (symbolic, fluid-construction, structural-construction) are taken from their inventory. I have placed the categories in order of the increasing cognitive demand which engagement in those activities might require. However, this hierarchy can only be considered arbitrary, since, for example, a child might be engaged in an imaginative play bout (symbolic) which requires greater cognitive engagement than playing with sand (fluid-construction). The degree of cognitive demand provided by various pre-school activities is a contentious issue, with research offering disparate findings (see Sylva et al., 1980 and Perry, 1985).

I computed the percentage of children in the total sample making responses falling within each category of description (see Figure 7.6).

Figure 7.6: Categories of Description Relating to What Children Like About Their Nursery Class



Most children said that they liked being involved in symbolic play of various kinds and in fluid-construction activities, particularly painting and sand play, where the latter was available. Interestingly, Broadhead's (1997) observational study in one nursery class illustrates that most co-operative and social play occurs in activities involving brick play ('structural-construction', exemplified in 'Scaffolding on a Building Site' in Chapter Four) and water play ('fluid-construction'). Yet only one child in my study mentioned brick play, and none mentioned water play (these activities were not available at Fiddlebrooke). The home corner, sand play, dough and art activities were frequently named by the children, and yet Broadhead (1997) shows these to be associated with low levels of co-operative and social activity (see 'Artist at Work: The Making of a Masterpiece' in Chapter Four illustrating a lone child at work). This may mean that 4-year-olds stated preferences are for those activities which do not involve other children. Further research combining more in-depth interviewing and observation of children's activities might be fruitful.

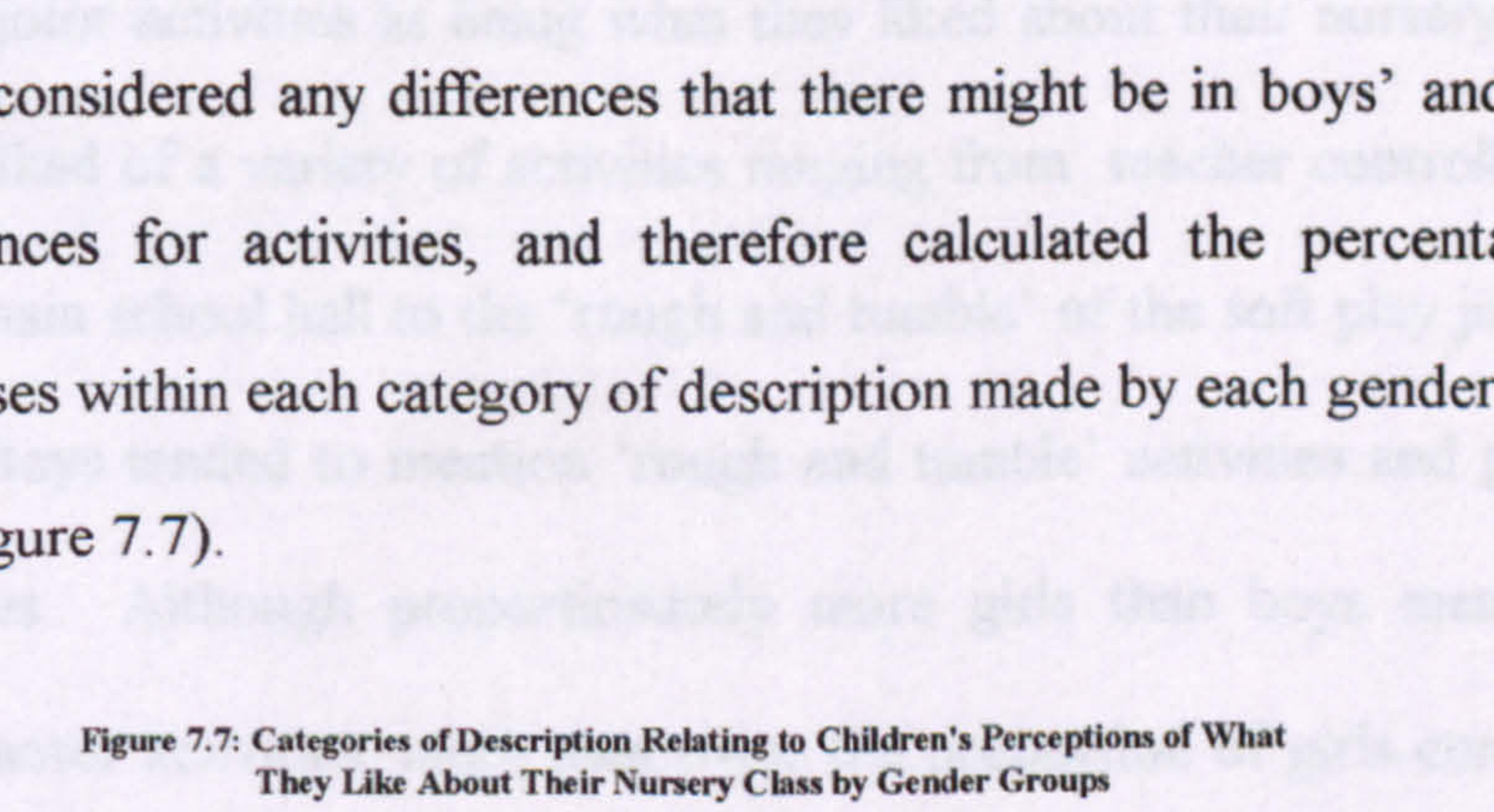
The least mentioned activities were those involving literacy and numeracy skills, a finding congruent with that of Wolfgang and Phelps (1983) in their study of pre-school children's (N=35) play material choices in one day care centre. The majority of children in their study, which employed photographs to which the children had to point (mentioned in Chapter Two), chose items such as climbing frames, slides etc. (termed 'sensori-motor') as being their favourite play material. In

my study 'gross-motor' activities (bikes, outdoor play, soft room play etc.) were second to literacy and numeracy as the *least* mentioned activities relating to children's likes in nursery class. The different modes of data collection, however, may have affected results. Children in the Wolfgang and Phelps (1983) study were forced to choose between photographs of two activities. In my study no such visual cues were offered, save the ones provided by the nursery setting itself. Since most gross-motor activities took place out of the classroom, children had to call upon memories of events outside their immediate context.

Gender differences regarding what children like about their nursery class

I next considered any differences that there might be in boys' and girls' preferences for activities, and therefore calculated the percentage of responses within each category of description made by each gender group (see Figure 7.7).

Figure 7.7: Categories of Description Relating to Children's Perceptions of What They Like About Their Nursery Class by Gender Groups



Congruent with earlier observational research which suggests that boys tend to use constructional toys on more occasions than do girls (Thomas,

1986), more boys than girls said that they enjoyed structural-construction, particularly play with small construction toys, whilst a greater proportion of girls than boys mentioned fluid-construction.

Within the fluid construction category boys tended to mention playing with sand (see also Dunn and Morgan's (1987) observational research). Proportionately more boys than girls said that they liked symbolic play. However, most boys tended to mention play with small toys such as cars, whereas girls mentioned socio-dramatic play in the home corner.

Interestingly, a greater proportion of girls than boys mentioned gross-motor activities as being what they liked about their nursery class. Girls talked of a variety of activities ranging from teacher controlled PE in the main school hall to the 'rough and tumble' of the soft play jumping area. Boys tended to mention 'rough and tumble' activities and playing on bikes. Although proportionately more girls than boys mentioned gross-motor activities, more than twice the proportion of girls compared to boys said they enjoyed the quieter activities involving literacy skills. Such a stated preference by girls might be partly responsible for their superior performance in these skills compared to boys during their early schooling.

Children's perceptions of what they like in the different settings.

I continued analysis as before and computed the percentage of responses made by children *in each nursery class* within each category of description (see Figures 7.8, 7.9 and 7.10).

Figure 7.8: HARRINGTON

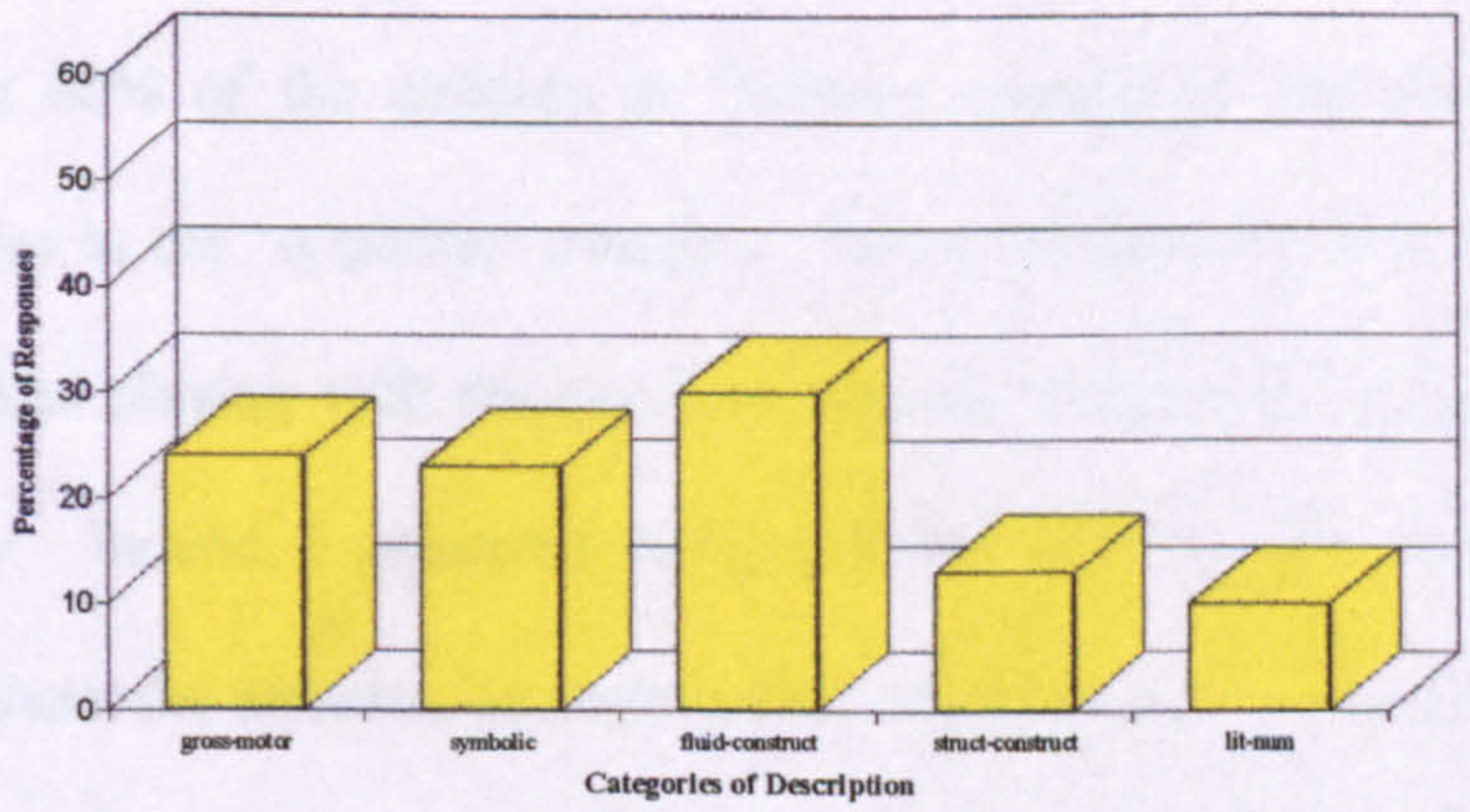


Figure 7.9: CATSBURY

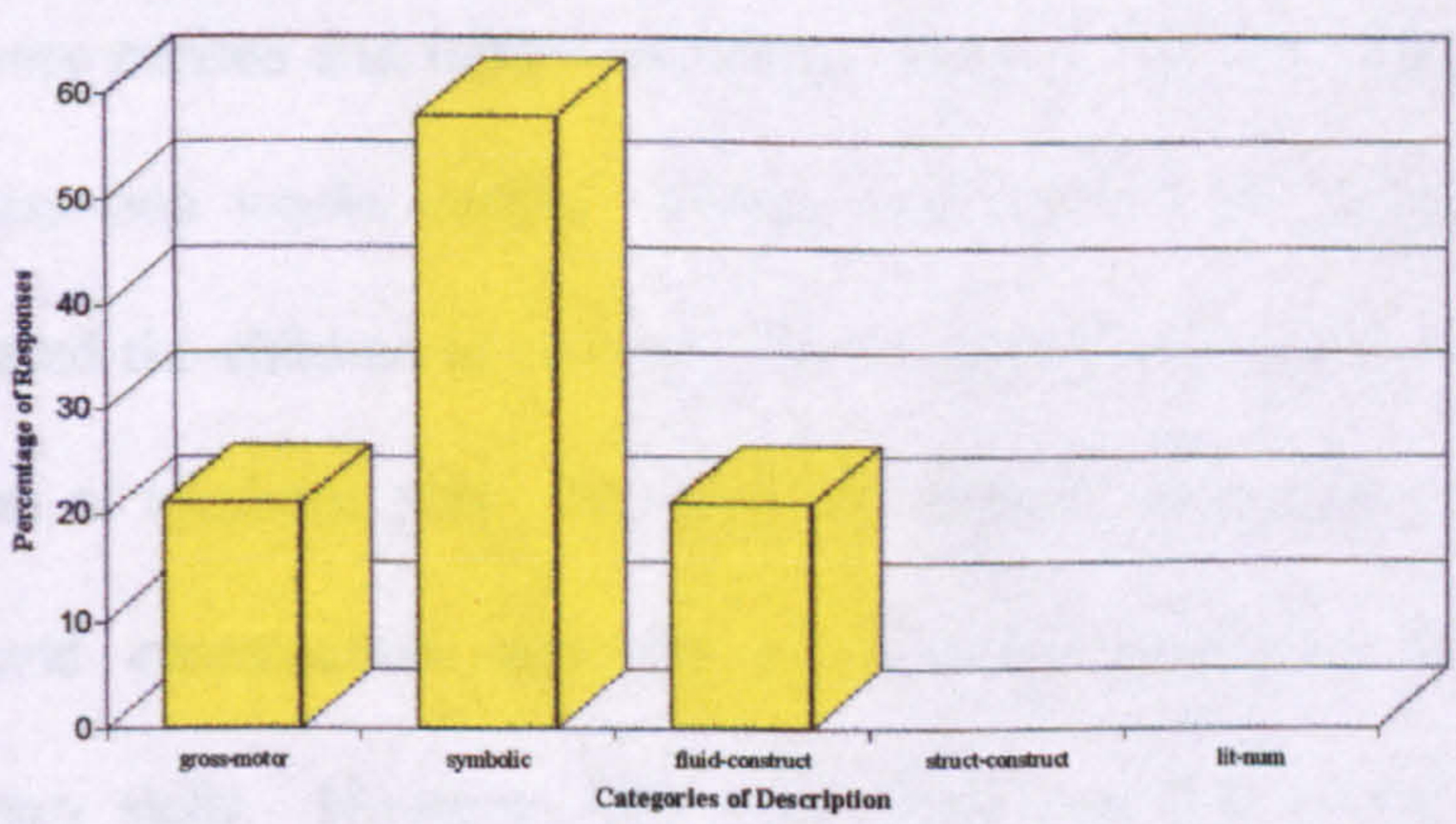
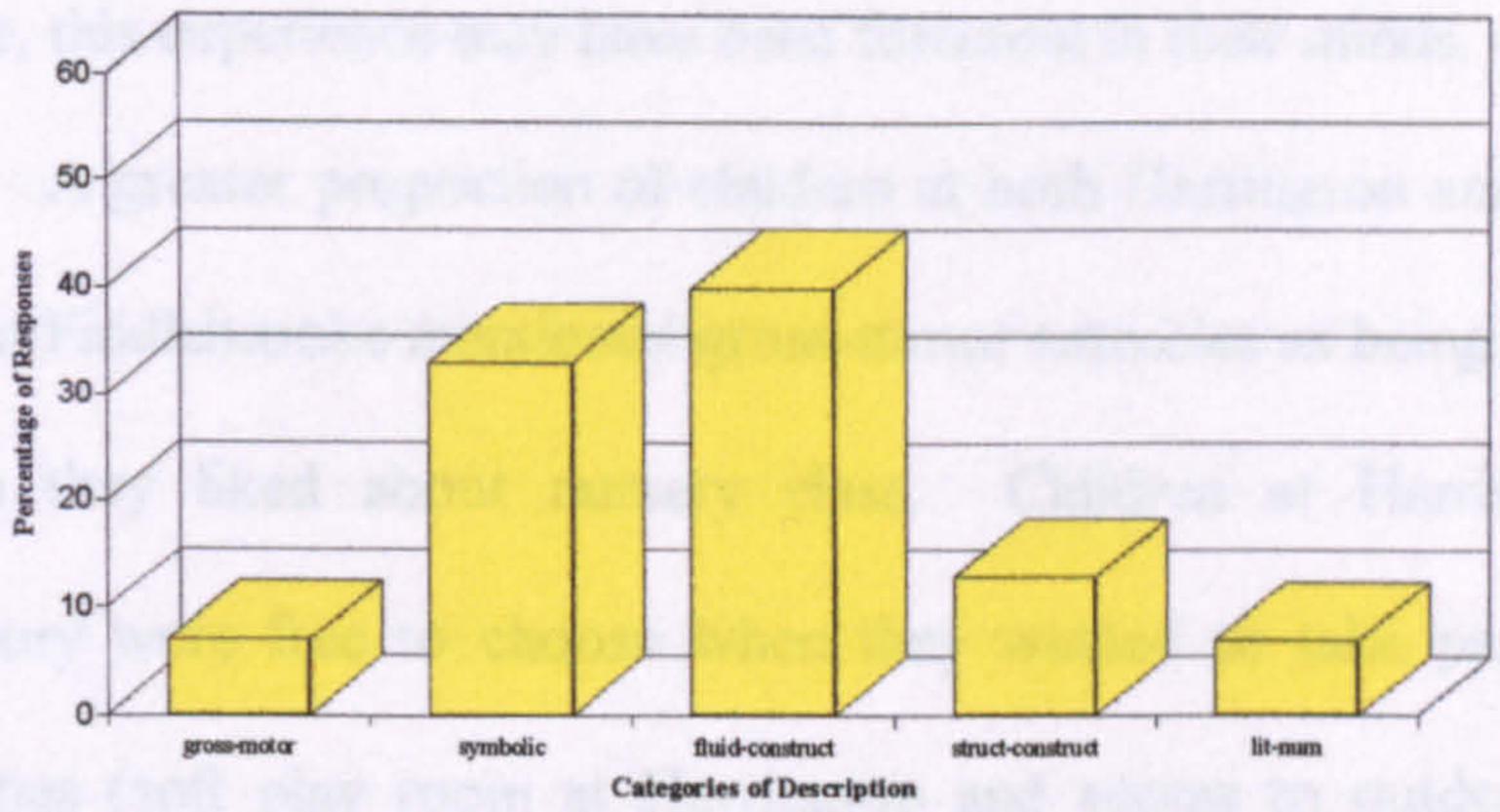


Figure 7.10: FIDDLEBROOKE



Almost 60% of the children at Catsbury mentioned that they enjoyed activities in the 'symbolic' category. Many of these children stated that they liked playing with the toy farm animals which had been put out on display. Indeed, I observed many children playing with these animals throughout the sessions, an observation which caused me to question why a comparatively 'low key' activity should be the site of so much interest. However, when I spoke to the parents they told me that their children had been very excited and talked 'non-stop' about a visit to a farm made by the class two weeks earlier. Hence, the visit to the farm may have stimulated the children to re-enact this wonderful experience through the medium of symbolic play. None of the children at Catsbury mentioned structural construction activities or activities involving literacy and numeracy skills. However, this may have been due to the children's particular interest in the farm animals at the time of my visit. Similarly, the children at Fiddlebrooke may have made more responses in the fluid-construction category since, on the day I spoke to them, they had been

involved in a painting session organised by Carol, the nursery nurse. Hence, this experience may have been foremost in their minds.

A greater proportion of children at both Harrington and Catsbury than at Fiddlebrooke mentioned gross-motor activities as being something which they liked about nursery class. Children at Harrington and Catsbury were free to choose when they wanted to take part in these activities (soft play room at Harrington and access to outdoor play at Catsbury). At Fiddlebrooke, however, children could only take part in these activities at certain times, under adult control (i.e. P.E. in the main school hall or outdoor play at set times). That more children at Catsbury and Harrington told me they liked gross-motor activities may have been because they could choose *when* they wanted to take part, rather than when adults imposed these activities upon them. The only gross-motor activity mentioned by a small proportion of children at Fiddlebrooke was P.E. in the main hall. Their outdoor play was restricted in that they had no toys on their play area; perhaps another reason why few of these children mentioned gross-motor activities.

Interestingly, when making comparisons across the different settings, I noticed that differences in boys' and girls' stated preferences for activities were more marked at Catsbury and Fiddlebrooke than at Harrington (see Evans and Fuller, 1997). At Harrington children were left very much to their own devices, and both boys and girls were observed to be involved in rough and tumble play, and to take part in

all of the many activities available to them. I tentatively suggest that the higher levels of adult interaction at Catsbury and Fiddlebrooke may have been responsible for the disparity in boys' and girls' preferences for activities. Perhaps the staff unwittingly reinforced gender stereotypes in their interactions with the children. More research might consider the impact of different levels of adult interaction in the pre-school classroom on gender differentiation.

What children dislike about their nursery class

Lastly, concerning children's perceptions of what they dislike about their nursery class, I created five categories of description and have given them below. Again, I have placed them in hierarchical order. This time I have considered the impact on a child's physical and psychological well-being as the criterion for the organisation of the hierarchy :-

- **no dislikes** - children said that there was nothing that they did not like (or they could not think of anything that they did not like).

- **activities** - children mentioned various activities in which they did not like taking part, for example:

  Jessica (Fiddlebrooke)*: Um ... um ... I don't like the train set ... I think I've finished now.*

- **discipline** - children mentioned that they did not like being disciplined by staff, for example:

  Julie (Catsbury)*: Um ... I don't like it when we get told off up the area* [home corner] *if we make a mess ... when it's a big mess.*

- **discomfort** - children made responses indicating that they did not like discomfort, for example:

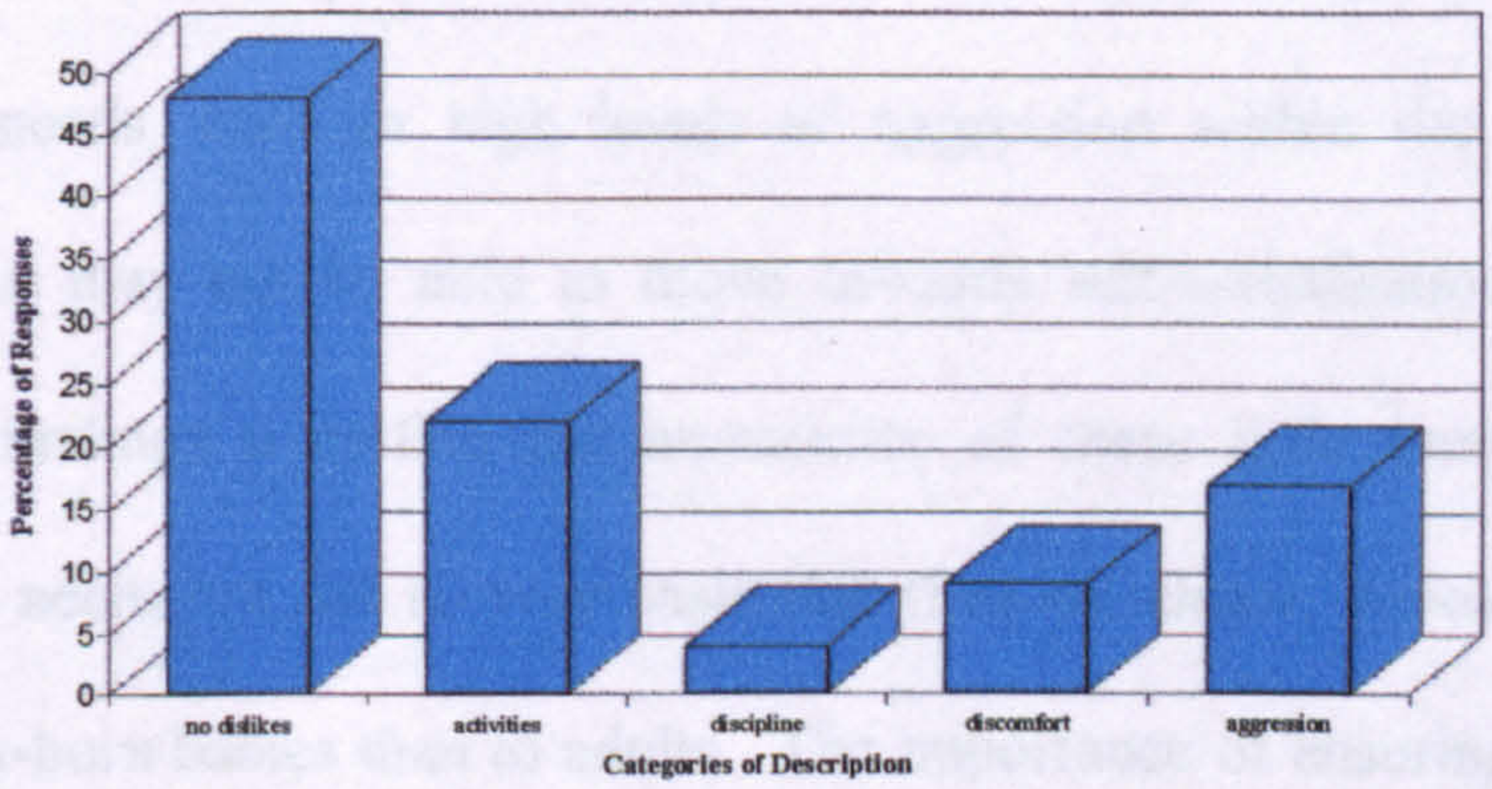
Russell (Harrington)*: Um ... I don't like playing ... um ... I don't like playing outside when I haven't got a coat.*

- **aggression** - children mentioned physically aggressive acts committed against them by other children.

Liam (Harrington)*: Um ... I don't like someone who hits me, but if they be ... be nice to me I do like it.*

Again, I computed the percentage of children making responses in each category of description in the total sample in order to look for patterns in the data (see Figure 7.11).

Figure 7.11: Categories of Description Relating to What Children Dislike About Their Nursery Class



Almost 50% of the children who spoke to me had no dislikes regarding their nursery class i.e. they could not think of anything which they disliked. But I have to admit to being surprised at the children's responses regarding their dislikes. Since the children had only spoken of *activities* when talking about what they liked about their nursery class, I assumed that they would talk about these when telling me about their dislikes. However, whilst some did speak of activities, 30% of the

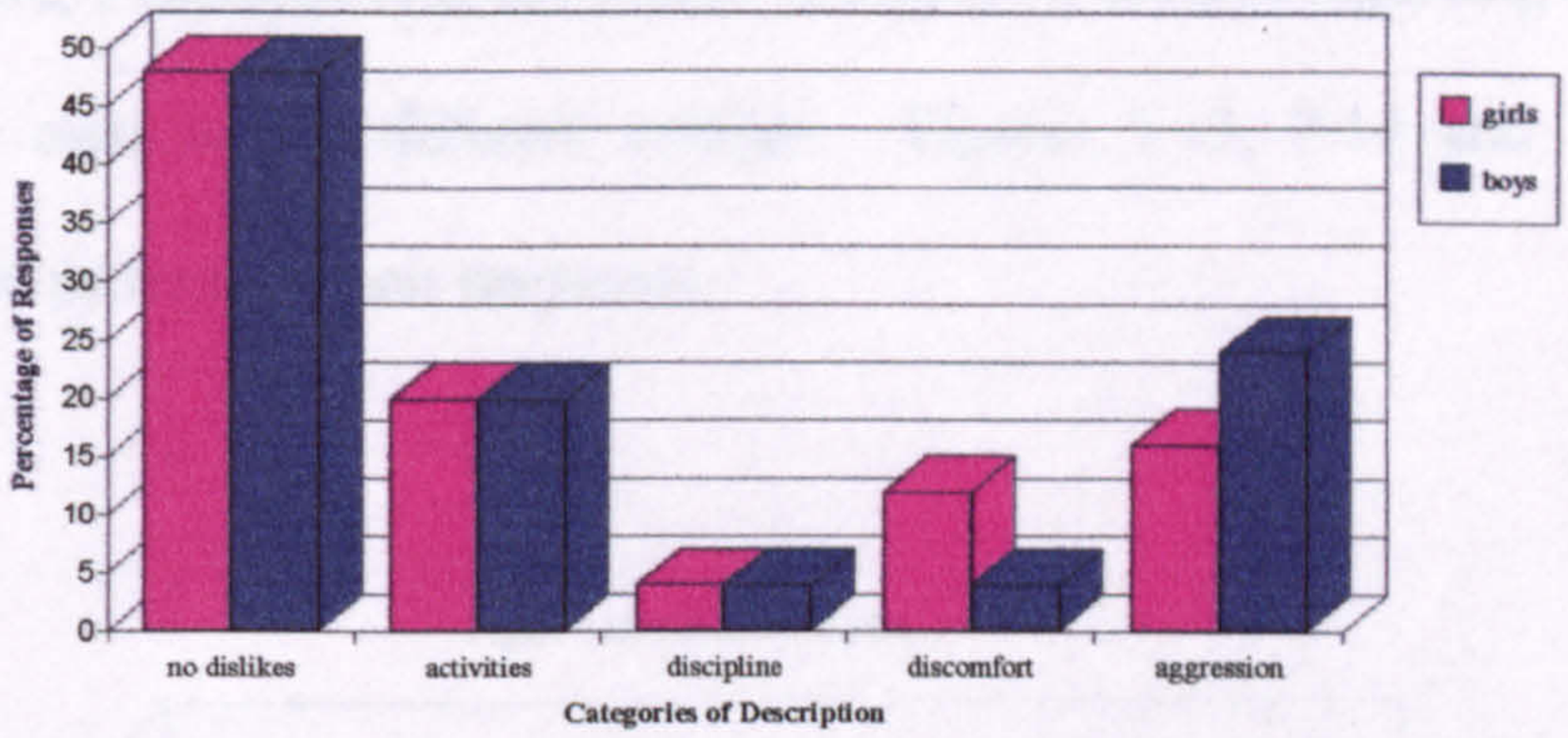
children mentioned aspects which might cause them physical or mental distress.

At this point my thoughts turn to Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs. At the bottom of his hierarchy are the basic needs - *physiological* and *safety* followed by *belongingness* and *esteem*. If each of these needs is not satisfied then an individual cannot reach her/his full potential, '*self-actualisation*' (Maslow, 1970). So, considering the very bottom of this hierarchy, some of these children may have been expressing their desire for their physiological and safety needs to be more completely satisfied within their nursery class. In cases of a deficiency in the satisfaction of basic needs, such as high levels of aggression within the classroom, children may not be able to move towards self-actualisation. To me, these findings underline the immaturity of these little people, people whose needs are still so very basic that they are closer, developmentally, to new-born babies than to adults. The importance of ensuring that these basic needs are met should surely be a priority for all practitioners involved with such young children.

Gender differences regarding children's dislikes in nursery class

After conducting a matrix search in NUD.IST, I calculated the percentages of boys' and girls' responses in each category of description and expressed these graphically (see Figure 7.12).

Figure 7.12: Categories of Description Relating to Children's Perceptions of What They Dislike About Their Nursery Class by Gender Groups



Interestingly, the same proportions of boys and girls made responses in the 'no dislikes', 'activities' and 'discipline' categories. However, a greater proportion of boys (24%) than girls (16%) mentioned physically aggressive actions by other children, whereas girls had a greater tendency to mention situations of discomfort (12% girls, 4% boys). I suggest boys *may* be more likely to be involved in play in which aggressive acts were taking place, and hence more aware of such situations. But were the boys less likely to complain about discomfort than girls because they had already been socialised into male 'macho' roles? More research might enable further exploration of these issues.

A more detailed consideration of gender differences in children's perceptions of their nursery education is given in a presentation paper which I gave at an international conference (Evans and Fuller, 1997).

Children's perceptions of what they dislike in the different settings

As before, I explored any differences in children's dislikes regarding their nursery class in the different settings. Figures 7.13, 7.14 and 7.15 illustrate patterns in their responses.

Figure 7.13: HARRINGTON

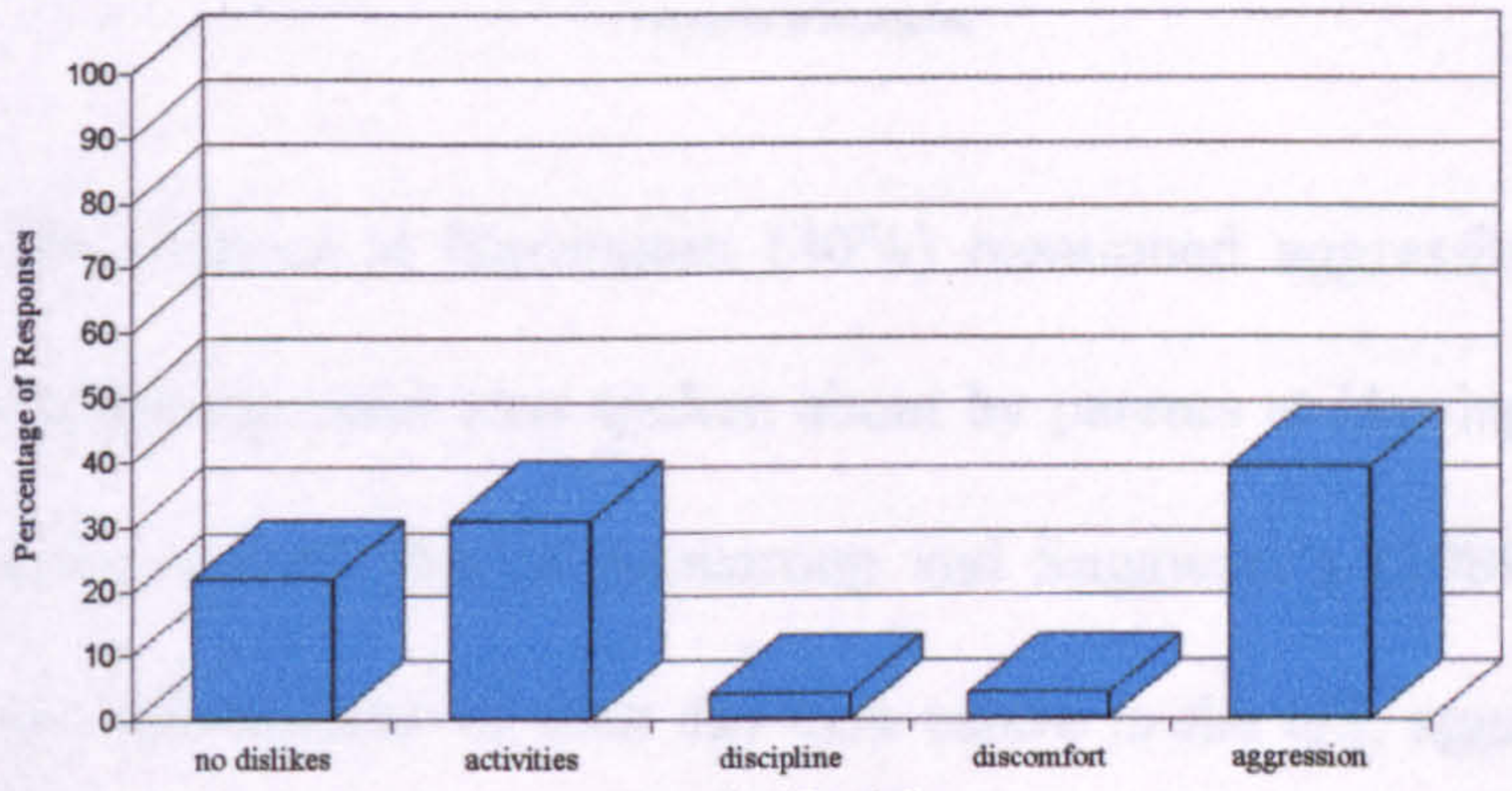


Figure 7.14: CATSBURY

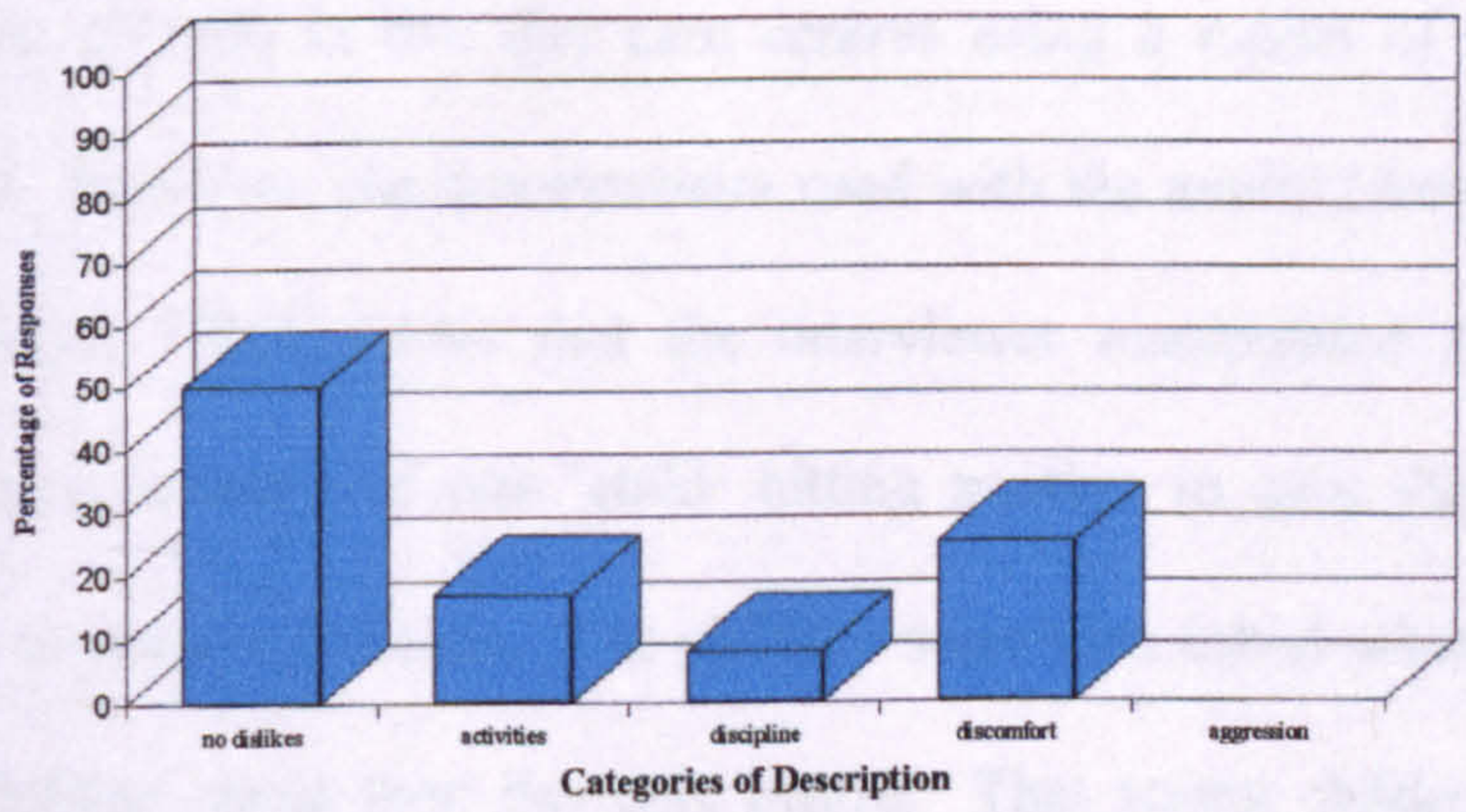
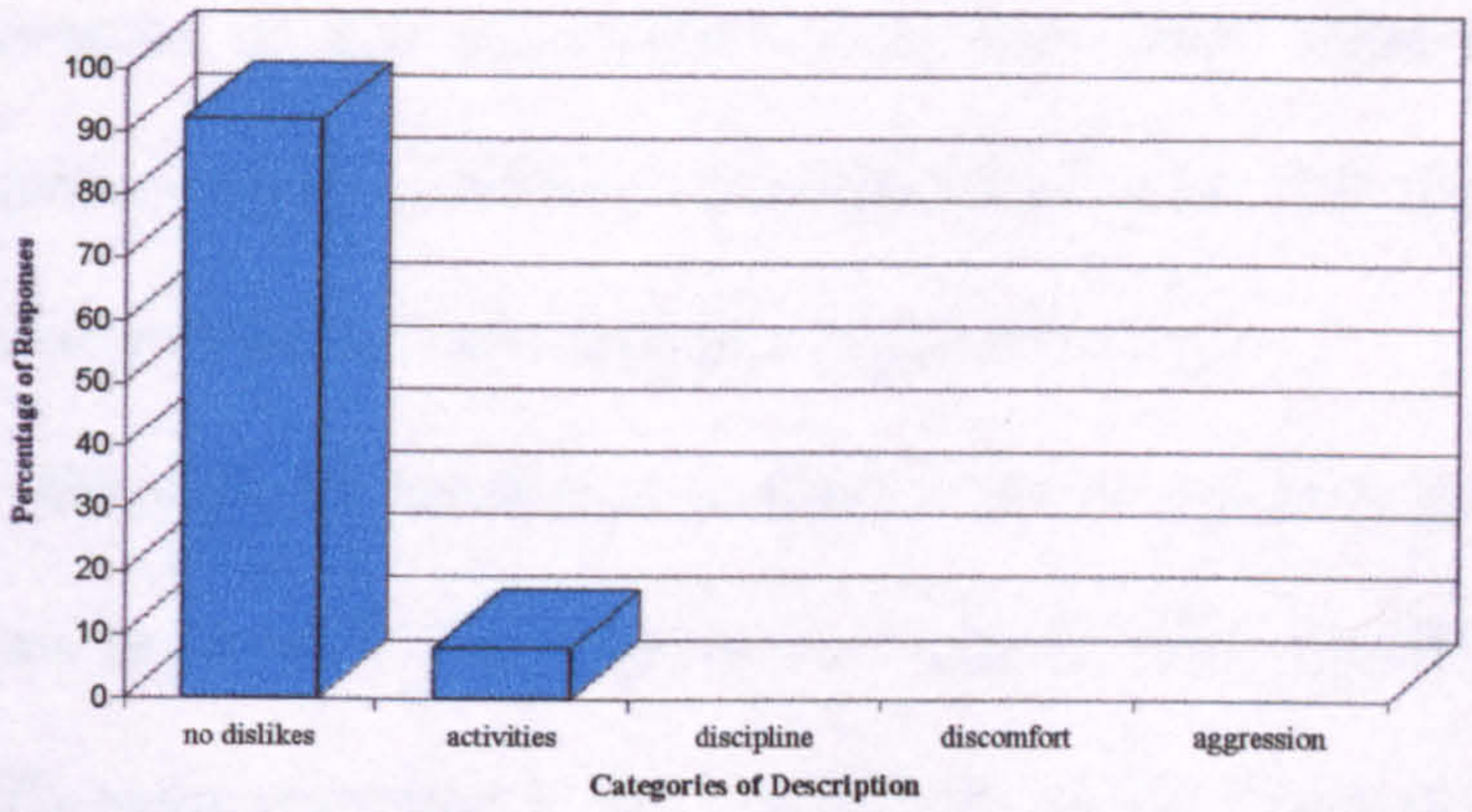


Figure 7.15: FIDDLEBROOKE



Only the children at Harrington (40%) mentioned aggression amongst their dislikes (an issue also spoken about by parents at Harrington). It is interesting to note that in Armstrong and Sugawara's (1989) study of children's perceptions of their day care centre in the US, aggressive acts by other children was the most frequently mentioned aspect which was disliked. As discussed in Chapter Two, the researchers interviewed children (N=58) in five day care centres using a model of a day care centre. However, the questionnaire used with the model (Armstrong and Sugawara, 1985) shows that the interviewer manipulated the toys to portray a scenario of one 'child' hitting another to gain the children's views on such a situation. The children were then asked what they liked and *disliked* about their day care centre. That young children are very suggestible in interviews (Parker, 1984; Moston, 1987), may mean that the responses in Armstrong and Sugawara's (1989) study were strongly influenced by the interview procedure itself. When the children in my study were asked *directly* what they disliked about their nursery class,

only those children at Harrington mentioned aggression. Again, characteristics of the microsystem may have been influential in the development of these children's perceptions of what they dislike about their nursery class, an issue discussed in Chapter Eight.

Although the children at Fiddlebrooke were able to give various responses as to what they liked about nursery class, regarding dislikes over 90% made responses in the 'no dislikes' category compared to 50% at Catsbury and 22% at Harrington. Whilst it might be accepted that the Fiddlebrooke children were indeed 'satisfied customers', certain microsystem features may have affected their responses in the interviews which are discussed in Chapter Eight.

Playing with Telephones: reflections on the interviewing technique

The children seemed to enjoy using the telephones, some asking if I could bring them back to the classroom next morning. When I arrived at Fiddlebrooke on my last visit, a group of children dashed up to me to ask if I had brought the telephones with me. Some children talked to me about the telephones during their interviews, as illustrated below.

> ***Pauline:*** *Is there anything you don't like in nursery?*
> ***Sally:*** *Um ... no.*
> ***Pauline:*** *You like everything. That's lovely.*
> ***Sally:*** *I like these phones. When you go you can leave your box under here* [the table] *... we can play with them again. You can leave them in the box, under here.*
> ***Pauline:*** *I'm ever so sorry but I can't leave them behind.*
> ***Sally:*** *Bye.*
> ***Pauline:*** *Oh, bye for now.*
> ***Sally:*** *See you later. Bye.*

*

Pauline: *Tell me about the best things in nursery.*
Daniel: *Playing with these phones.*
Pauline: *Oh you like playing with these phones.*
Daniel: *I've got a phone at home.*
Pauline: *Have you got a phone at home to play with?*
(pause)
Daniel: *Mine's got Mickey Mouse mine has ... when you ring the phone on my telephone ... on the back it goes that way and that way* [moves his hand from side to side] ... *it says Mickey Mouse.*
Pauline: *Mickey Mouse ... lovely.*
Daniel: *I don't know what the other people says.*
(pause)

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Hatch (1990) highlights the problem of young children's egocentric speech in interviews. The last part of the dialogue between Daniel and myself may illustrate egocentricity. However, of the sixty interviews conducted such egocentrism was apparent in only *two*. This finding further reinforces my notion that the telephone interviewing technique may enable young children to perform at a higher developmental level than they would during standard interviews.

Some children spoke to me very briefly, closing the interview within a few moments of starting. The following transcript illustrates such a situation and shows how ***Jonathan*** (Catsbury) exercised his rights to withdraw from the interview situation.

Pauline: *Hello. Who am I speaking to?*
Jonathan: *Jonathan.*
Pauline: *Hello, Jonathan. How are you today?*
Jonathan: *OK.*
Pauline: *Good. I wonder if you can help me* ... etc.

... I wondered why you come ... etc.
Jonathan: *Cos mummy wants me to. Bye.* (puts down the receiver)
Pauline: *Oh, bye then.*

On the other hand, some children wanted to engage in relatively long conversations, and I encouraged this by bringing in other topics for discussion; for example, ***Leanne*** (Catsbury) made some quite detailed responses as if trying to keep the 'game' going. As she talked, she used 'adult' mannerisms, sitting back in her chair, and sometimes putting her hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone. Having told me that she did not like the food in nursery class, I asked her to tell me about it:

Leanne: *Um ... Um ... we have apple ... and ... milk. I don't have milk anymore ..... I need to have water when I was poorly, but now I have squash .... but I have apple and squash.*
Pauline: *You have apple and squash. Lovely.* (Leanne does not seem to want to finish the conversation, so I ask a question) *Have you got a best friend in nursery?*
Leanne: *Yeah, Emma.*
Pauline: *You play together.*
Leanne: *Yeah .... we play outside of nursery .... we play at our house ..... and we go* (Leanne struggles to find the right words) .... *we meet ..... and we meet our videos .... we meet borrow our videos.*
Pauline: *You watch videos together.*
Leanne: *Yeah.*

The conversation continued as we talked about Leanne's favourite video 'Snow White'. However, the extract shows how, in the familiar surroundings of the nursery class, and within the relaxed medium of telephone role play, children were able to sustain quite lengthy conversations with me, a stranger. Leanne elaborated her responses (as

did Sally and Daniel above), increasing her 'length of turn' (Wood and Wood, 1983, p.155). As mentioned in Chapter Two, the Woods found in their research that teachers who use a questioning style when talking to young children increased their power and caused children to produce short utterances. Whilst I *tried* not to ask too many questions, I found this difficult, and did ask more questions than intended. Perhaps 'Teacher Me' was operational, but I was trying to seek children's views and opinions, and at times automatically asked questions to keep the conversation going. However, the use of the telephones may have compensated for any increase in my power which might have developed through questioning. Through play the children and I were able to assume roles which were more equal than in usual adult-child interactions.

The nursery teachers were surprised at the effectiveness of the technique in encouraging the children to talk. Beatrice (Fiddlebrooke) in particular commented that some of the children who spoke to me on the telephones had rarely or *never* spoken to staff. At Harrington, ***Sam***, who had very poorly developed linguistic skills, limited almost entirely to monosyllabic utterances, tried desperately to communicate with me through the telephones. He returned to the activity table several times in an attempt to hold a 'conversation', bringing with him an old telephone directory he had found in the home corner. The telephones provided a medium through which Sam wanted to communicate. Gillen (1997), in

her study of pre-school children's telephone discourse skills during play, also found the telephone to be a 'stimulant of talk ... not restricted to the already articulate or confident' (p.20). Telephones as an interviewing medium might therefore be usefully employed by teachers in the classroom as a means of encouraging and monitoring young children's linguistic skills.

Interestingly, Anne (Harrington) kept records of the children's linguistic ability, by conducting individual, tape-recorded interviews in her office twice each year. She remarked on the children's body language during her interviews, saying that they had great difficulty in keeping still and seemed not to know what to do with their hands (a stress indicator). I was allowed to listen to one of Anne's tapes. There were many one word answers and long pauses and silences when the children just gave a physical response (e.g. head nodding). Many children changed the subject of the conversation by giving irrelevant responses and engaged in egocentric speech.

The interviews may have had a differential impact upon the children in the different settings. The children at Fiddlebrooke were accustomed to being directed in what they were doing at the activity tables. Interactions were under the control of adults, who therefore put themselves in positions of power. I may have been perceived by the children in a similarly powerful role during the interviews at an activity table. Such a perception may have influenced the children's ability to

respond. The children at Catsbury and Harrington did not experience such didactic interactions at the activity tables, and therefore my attempts at power reduction during the interviews may have been improved, and, hence, their ability to make responses enhanced.

Summary and discussion

As I have already suggested, interviewing within the relaxed medium of role play with telephones may enable young children to function at a higher cognitive level than they might do during standard interview techniques. Such a suggestion warrants further exploration.

Phenomenography has provided me with a useful framework for systematising or mapping children's perceptions of their nursery class experience. The use of categories of description as 'outcomes' of the research has enabled me to *characterise* young children's developing and situated perceptions.

My macro-analysis of data from all three nursery classes resulted in there being created seven categories of description for children's perceptions of why they attend nursery class, and five each relating to what they like and dislike about their nursery class. Such findings agree with Marton's (1981, 1988a, 1988b) contention that there are a *limited number* of qualitatively different ways in which individuals perceive aspects of the world. These categories of description held across two settings in the case of children's perceptions of why they attend nursery

class (Harrington and Catsbury) and their likes in nursery class (Harrington and Fiddlebrooke). However, with regard to children's dislikes, Harrington had an 'extra' category ('aggression'), not shared with the two other classes.

There were differences in the extent to which children made responses falling within the various categories of description in the different classes. Referring to Bronfenbrenner's (1992) process-person-context model, to what extent are these differences due to characteristics of the nursery class setting (microsystem)? What features of the context, the processes occurring within it and the attributes of significant others might be responsible for the most salient differences in the development of perceptions of the children in each nursery class? I have discussed some microsystem features which might be responsible. More in-depth discussion is given in Chapter Eight in which all perspectives are brought together.

Concluding thoughts

So where was 'I' in this part of my research? Well, 'Scientist Me' was there, happily categorising responses and displaying 'data' in bar graphs. 'Dramatist Me' was also there playing her part in the role play, with 'Teacher Me' asking questions. But, this time, yet another me came forward to take up a front-line position - 'Mother Me'. 'Mother Me' *instinctively* became aware of any distress caused to the children during

interviewing; she felt uncomfortable if the children looked uncomfortable. She *instinctively* wanted the children to experience the interviews as enjoyable and natural episodes in their play, and felt rewarded when they asked if she would repeat the activity on another day.

But what are my thoughts now? I have categorised the children's responses and I am quite satisfied with that process. In doing this I have tried to 'characterise' what the children said to me. I have *reported* the data, and *represented* it in bar graphs. But why have I been happy to work with the children's responses in this way, yet when working with those of the parents I felt the need to present so much more information? As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the children made relatively short responses. Also they did not carry as much baggage as their parents; there were fewer constructs to be taken into account.

And so I have talked to these little people and they have told me about their 'lived-for-the-moment' perceptions. All the children who wanted, or had sufficient confidence, to speak to me and sound their voices, have done so. Their voices are sounded again in the next chapter when they are brought together with those of the staff, parents, my own and others. So we move on to hear the chorus.

Part Four: The Chorus

Chapter Eight

Crystallisation

Introduction

In this chapter I will bring together expressed thoughts and opinions of staff, parents and children. I will discuss major areas of agreement and disagreement concerning perceptions of the purposes of, and 'quality' in, nursery education. Finally, I will bring together the voices of the three groups within the three settings, attempting to put perceptions in context by adding my voice which reminds the reader of my observations. In this way I hope to 'crystallise' (Richardson, 1994, p.522) my 'findings'. Richardson (1994) suggests *crystallisation* of findings as opposed to *triangulation*. The triangle is a flat, rigid structure which does not permit

the inclusion of multiple perspectives and differences. Richardson (1994) proposes the crystal as an image providing symmetry with an:

> infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimentionalities and angles of approach. ... What we see depends on our angle of repose (p.522).

The use of such a metaphor accords with my research, since many different perspectives were sought, and might also be considered congruent with Tyler's (1986) notions of 'perspectival relativity' (p.127).

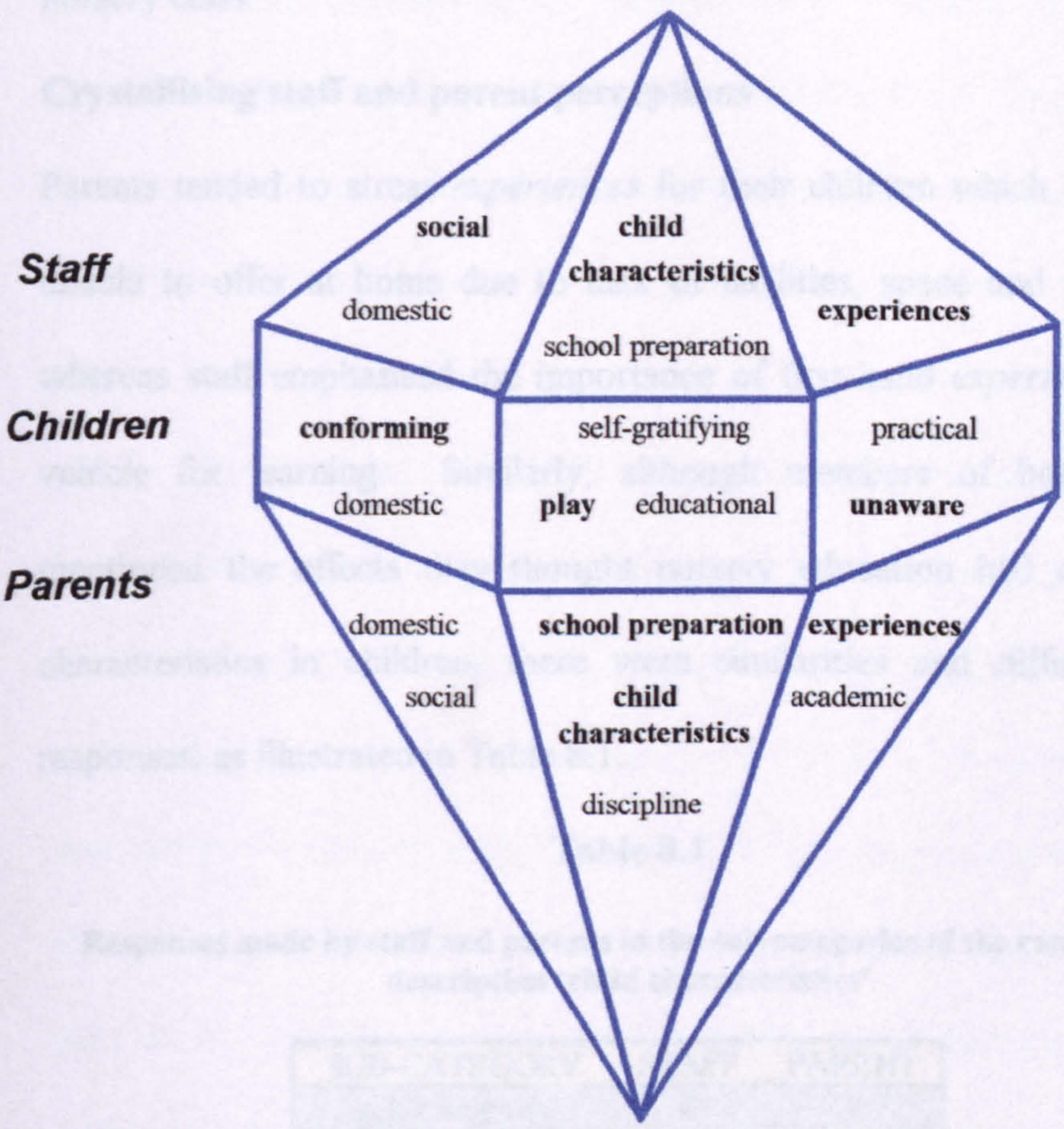
Much of my discussion relies on the 'paradigmatic mode' (Bruner, 1986, p.12) of *reporting*, with parents, staff and children being presented as almost homogeneous groups. This was a result of my need to manage the large amounts of information which I gathered within the original framework of the study. I switch to 'narrative mode' (Bruner, 1986, p.13) when I bring voices together in poetic form ('rap'). In this way I attempt to both decentre myself as author and *evoke* thoughts and feelings in the reader, calling upon her/him to make her/his own interpretations. Following the poems is my own 'didactic analysis' (Barone, 1995, p.67).

Crystallising perceptions of the purposes of nursery education

Comparisons were made by conducting matrix intersection searches in NUD.IST. In order to visually [re]present these perceptions, I have constructed a qualitative model (Radnofsky, 1996) in the form of a crystal (see Figure 8.1, over). Radnofsky contends that such metaphorical

Figure 8.1

A Crystal of Perceptions of the Purposes of Nursery Education



models 'may actually help construct meaning beyond the rational organisation of data described or shown in a well-organised chart' (1996, p.389). In constructing such a model, I offer the reader another conduit for interpretation. Labels for categories of description into which the majority of responses fell for each group of participants appear in bold type. Those for the children relate to their perceptions of why they attend nursery class.

Crystallising staff and parent perceptions

Parents tended to stress *experiences* for their children which they were unable to offer at home due to lack of facilities, space and resources, whereas staff emphasised the importance of first-hand *experiences* as a vehicle for learning. Similarly, although members of both groups mentioned the effects they thought nursery education had on certain characteristics in children, there were similarities and differences in responses, as illustrated in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1

Responses made by staff and parents in the sub-categories of the category of description 'child characteristics'

SUB-CATEGORY	STAFF	PARENT
self-discipline	#	#
confidence	#	#
interest	#	#
independence	#	#
improved language	#	#
self-esteem	#	-
maturity	-	#
calming effect	-	#

Parents expressed the view that nursery education was effective in increasing children's maturity and also in calming, what they perceived to be, boisterous behaviour. Staff did not mention these factors. However, mothers and fathers know more about their children than do staff, and in a one-to-one relationship with their children in the home are more likely to detect such changes in patterns of behaviour. Hence, parents may call upon their own experiences of changes in their children's behaviour, however subtle, when expressing their perceptions of the purposes of nursery education. The development of such perceptions might be considered as resulting from a *mesosystem* interaction (home and nursery class).

The development of *social skills* was highlighted as a purpose of nursery education in discussions with staff, whilst parents placed more emphasis on *preparation for school*. Again, the differing parent and staff perceptions might be interpreted within the context of the micro- and mesosystems. Nursery staff are more likely to observe children's social interactions with each other and with adults, and to be concerned about individuals working in harmony. Anti-social behaviour, whether aggression or withdrawal, may have a detrimental impact upon the pattern of activities occurring within the microsystem. Hence, staff will possess a heightened awareness of the importance of social integration.

Whilst most parents emphasised the importance of *preparation for school* as being a purpose of nursery education, amongst staff only the

nursery nurses stressed this aspect. As mentioned in Chapter Six, most parents were concerned about the emotional demands made upon their children in the transition from home to school, some of these concerns evolving from parents' own bad experiences of starting school. This mesosystem interaction arises out of the differential characteristics of the two microsystems - the home and the nursery class - in which children have to adapt to different patterns of activities and interact with significant others who may have differing cultural beliefs, expectations of behaviour and personality traits. Interestingly, the nursery nurses also placed emphasis on children's emotional adjustment to school. Such concerns may be considered congruent with their caring role in the nursery class, or perhaps the mother-substitute role which they may have adopted as a result of their training as nursery nurses.

Parent perceptions that the acquisition of *academic* skills and the learning of *discipline* as purposes of nursery education might have evolved through concerns resulting from media coverage at that time (both television and newspaper) suggesting poor standards of literacy, numeracy and behaviour in schools - a macrosystem influence. However, the issue of the 'visible pedagogy' (Bernstein, 1977, p.522) as being more acceptable to 'working-class' parents was discussed in Chapter Six. Such a lack of congruence in parent and staff perceptions has been highlighted in previous research (see Tizard et al., 1981; Blatchford at al, 1982).

Crystallising child and adult perceptions

Whilst I had created seven categories of description from children's responses, only one was in agreement with adult perceptions - *'domestic'*. Therefore, it might be assumed that the children's perceptions of the purposes of nursery education differed from those of parents and staff.

Not all children of parents interviewed volunteered to take part in my research, but, where possible, I explored this disagreement further through a comparison of responses from parent-child dyads. I offer some of these comparisons below.

***

Mother (Jemma): *I think it's actually getting ready for school ... that first initial day when they stay the whole day ... a bit of a wrench.*
Child (Ben): *I come to play on the bikes.*

***

Mother (Judith): *I think it gives them a really good start .... they start doing their letters and things like that.*
Child (Jessica): *Because I'm big enough.*

***

Mother (Elizabeth): *Discipline. It starts the discipline off, and they need that don't they.*
Child (Sally): *Cos my mum brings me in the car.*

***

Father (Bill): *It gives 'em a chance to make friends too.*
Child (Daniel): *Um ... to make things.*

***

The above randomly selected examples demonstrate a lack of agreement between parent and child perceptions. That young children may not take on the opinions of adults within the microsystem (i.e. staff) regarding the purpose of their attendance is illustrated in the poems I offer later in this chapter. These findings powerfully illustrate that such young children are able to *formulate and voice their own opinions* and not merely echo the views of significant others.

Crystallising perceptions of 'quality' in nursery education

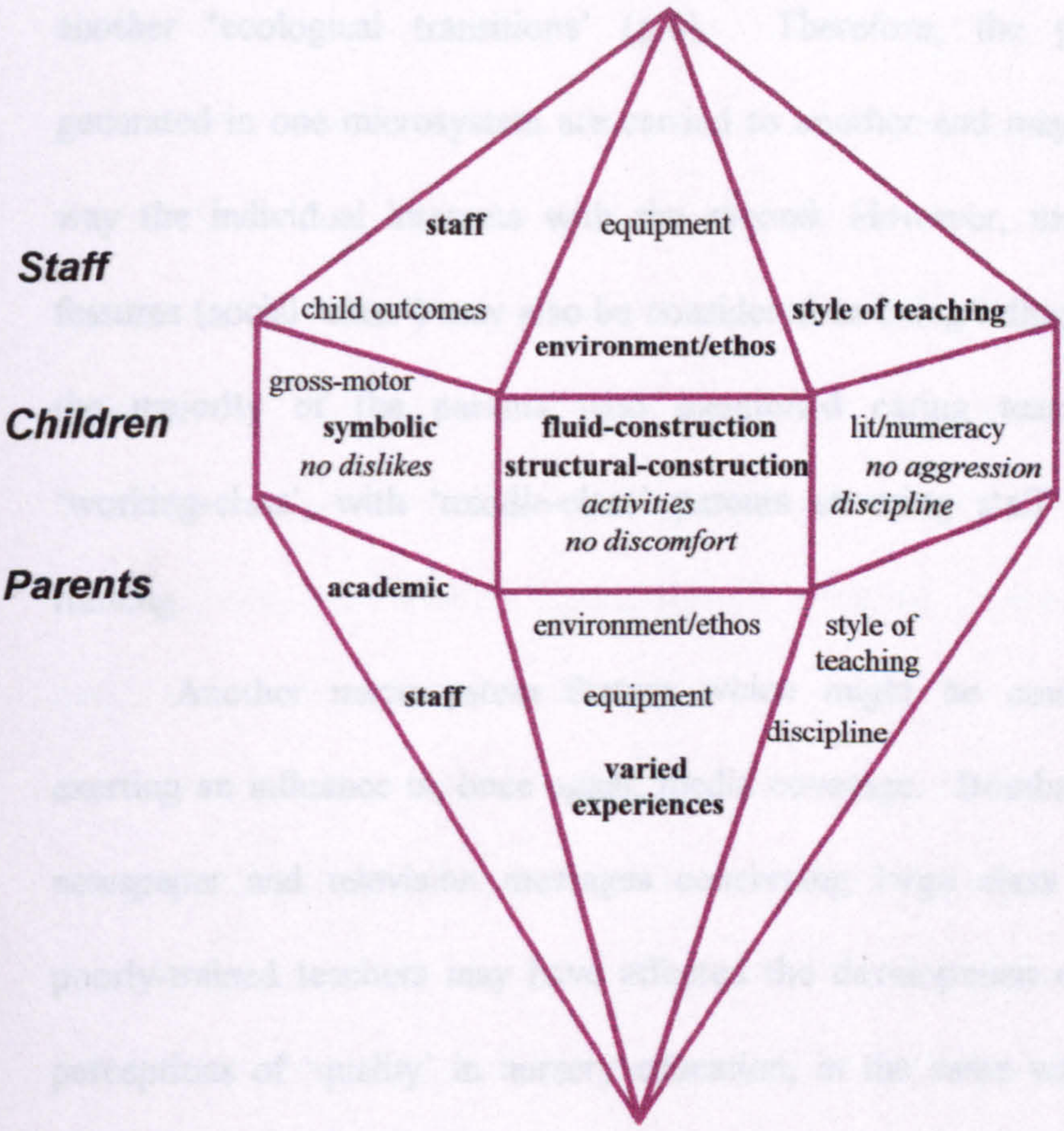
I constructed a crystal of perceptions of 'quality' in nursery education (see Figure 8.2 over). Children's perceptions of 'quality' are represented by their likes and dislikes.

Overall, most staff stressed the *environment and general ethos* of an institution as being an indicator of 'quality' in nursery education, whilst parents generally emphasised the *staff*. Staff may consider environment/ethos as being a very important 'quality' indicator, since they spend more time interacting within the microsystem of the nursery class than do parents. They are more likely than parents to be aware of the need for a harmonious, happy and organised environment, since they are also referring to their own workplace.

On the other hand, parents may rate attributes of the staff as a salient indicator of 'quality', since these are the significant others with whom they interact within the microsystem, and to whom parents will

Figure 8.2

A Crystal of Perceptions of 'Quality' in Nursery Education



entrust the care of their children. Some parents, particularly those who had had bad experiences at school themselves, stressed that staff should be caring and approachable. Hence, it might be assumed that past experiences of other microsystems as a child had, to some extent, influenced these parents' perceptions of 'quality' in nursery education. Bronfenbrenner (1979) terms these movements from one microsystem to another 'ecological transitions' (p.6). Therefore, the perceptions generated in one microsystem are carried to another and may affect the way the individual interacts with the second. However, macrosystem features (social 'class') may also be considered as being influential, since the majority of the parents who mentioned caring teachers were 'working-class', with 'middle-class' parents stressing staff ratios and training.

Another macrosystem feature which might be considered as exerting an influence is, once again, media coverage. Bombardment by newspaper and television messages concerning large class sizes and poorly-trained teachers may have affected the development of parents' perceptions of 'quality' in nursery education, in the same way as their perceptions of the purposes of nursery education. Staff seem less susceptible to such media influence, a characteristic which may have resulted from their professional training. Interestingly, as mentioned in Chapter Five, only the nursery nurses mentioned characteristics of staff as

being associated with 'quality' in nursery education, and were the only staff in agreement with parents on this issue. Bronfenbrenner contends:

> Roles have a magiclike power to alter how a person is treated, how she [sic] acts, what she does, and thereby even what she thinks and feels (1979, p.6).

And so perhaps, again the caring/parent-substitute role adopted by the nursery nurses has dominated the formation of their perceptions of 'quality' in nursery education.

'*Style of teaching*', the second most mentioned 'quality' attribute in staff discussions, received scant mention by parents. Again, such a perception may be closely interwoven with staff roles within the microsystem. '*Equipment*' which is in abundance, up to date and in good condition, was the fourth most mentioned aspect by *both* parents and staff (but only nursery nurses). Again, here is evidence of congruence in parent and nursery nurse perceptions.

Parents mentioned *academic* skills and *varied experiences* as being associated with 'quality' in nursery education, these being the second most discussed issues. Again, these differences between parent and staff perceptions may be due to the parents' anxieties which may have evolved through macrosystem influences (TV and press). As mentioned in Chapter Six, parents had experienced their children's attendance at playgroup and may have expected more academic activities in a nursery class. *Discipline* as an indicator of 'quality' was also mentioned by parents, but not staff. This issue will be discussed later in this chapter.

Crystallising child and adult perceptions of 'quality' in nursery education.

It would have been entirely inappropriate to ask the children what they thought was meant by 'quality' in nursery education, and therefore I have compared parent and staff responses to that question with children's views on what they liked and disliked about their nursery class.

Considering perceptions of what they like in nursery class, all the children mentioned different activities. How can this one category of description be compared with those of adults which relate to 'quality'? I suggest that the children could have been saying that they like '*varied experiences*', and therefore it might be assumed that one aspect of 'quality' mentioned by parents is in agreement with the children's opinions. However, the children might also be expressing their desire to have plenty of *equipment* with which to play. Hence, children's opinions might be considered congruent with those of parents *and* nursery nurses. I therefore tentatively suggest that parent and nursery nurse perceptions of 'quality' in nursery education are more in line with those of children, than are those of nursery teachers and headteachers. Again these perceptions may be inextricably linked with roles. The perceptions of parents with young children are likely to be influenced by their day-to-day, hour by hour experiences with them, such that they are able to empathise with their needs. Nursery nurses, by virtue of their training, and the fact that they have chosen a career which involves working with

very young children, are likely to be in touch with young children's needs. So here an exosystem interaction is evident. The training background of the nursery nurses may have instilled perceptions which affect the way in which they interact within the microsystem (an ecological transition). Hence, they will bring with them to the microsystem in which the children are interacting and developing, certain characteristics and beliefs.

But I now need to consider what children *dislike* about their nursery class, since such perceptions might be considered as being negatively associated with the 'quality' of a setting. The majority of the children (52%) voiced their dislikes, with 30% mentioning aspects which might cause them physical or emotional harm. However, the category of description *'discipline'*, which I created from the children's responses, cannot be considered synonymous with that created from parents' responses. The children were saying that they did not like to be disciplined, whereas parents were stressing discipline in the classroom. So parent and child perceptions might be considered to be in opposition. However, children complained that they did not like the aggressive behaviour of other children. Such a perception might be conceived as arising from interactions in settings in which antisocial behaviour occurs through lack of *discipline.* Therefore, parent and child perceptions of this aspect of 'quality' could be considered in agreement. Some staff associated 'quality' with a happy, organised environment (*environment/ethos*). These perceptions might be considered congruent

with notions of discipline in a setting, and hence parallels might be evident in child and staff perceptions. With hindsight, it would have been interesting to enquire of parents and staff as to their own ideas of what the children liked and disliked about nursery class. Such an enquiry might have revealed the extent to which parents and staff understand the needs of the children in their care, and may be worthy of consideration in further research.

What seems apparent is that staff, parents and children in my study adopted different strategies in defining 'quality' in nursery education. Staff seemed to call upon 'professional' constructs, defining 'quality' within, what might be considered as, the 'right' philosophies. Parents appeared to conduct an assessment exercise on their children's nursery class, sometimes highlighting those features which they felt were absent. As I suggested in Chapter Six, 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1992, p.223) also seemed to be influential when parents defined 'quality'. For the children, the concept of 'quality', expressed as their perceptions of their likes and dislikes regarding their nursery class, appeared to be interwoven with their own immediate needs.

Structuring crystal lattices: perspectives in three settings

Again, I have been thrown into a state of perplexity by problems of representation. The style of writing which I have so far offered in this chapter might be considered that used in the standard social science texts.

I have been writing about 'general findings' associated with 'general groups' of research actors. However, when considering my actors within the three settings, their voices are vivified once more. Parents, children and staff were interviewed separately, but now I want to bring their voices together, and attempt to situate them in the context of each nursery class. Hence, I hope to further 'crystallise' my 'findings'. I could continue to write within a social-scientific genre, but feel that the voices, would be lost in a mire of detached wordage. So I have searched for a style of representation which would enable the voices to be 'heard' together, and in a medium free of a social-scientific sandwich of words.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, my source of inspiration has been the work of Laurel Richardson (1992a). Using the words spoken by her subject, Richardson reduced a 36 page transcript into a three page poem which represented the biography of a single mother (Louisa May's Story of Her Life). With this embryo of an idea in mind, I have chosen to represent the 'polyphonic chorus' (Packwood and Sikes, 1995) emitted from each nursery class in poetic form. Such a representation can in no way serve as an example of literary excellence. However, I hope that each 'poem' (or 'rap') will capture, and convey to the reader, the essence of what was said in the settings at that particular time.

The task of actually writing the poems was, however, far more difficult than I had expected. But, having pondered on the idea that poetry might be the device to represent the voices, I could not write in

any other way. And, as I started to work with the data, it became apparent that this was indeed, for me, *the* way to bring together views and opinions from different perspectives within the different settings.

Parent and staff voices have already been 'sounded' in Chapters Five and Six. Therefore, in writing the poems their words have been selected in order to illustrate the essence of what they said. So far, I have not fully revealed the children's voices, for, as I explained in Chapters Two and Seven, *characterising* their perceptions seemed more appropriate. But using the medium of poetry allows me to foreground the children's utterances. Therefore, a major part of each poem reveals the children's voices. And, perhaps such an emphasis should be considered appropriate, since the children are the most important people involved in the process of nursery education.

As an oscilloscope illustrates sound waves visually in the form of patterns of light, so my bar graphs illustrate to me the flavour of what was said by my participants and have provided a useful tool for guiding my selection of utterances. I have used the actual words spoken by parents, staff and children in an attempt give the text 'sociological veracity' (Richardson, 1992, p.132). On a very few occasions, however, I have replaced a phrase with a single word so that an opinion can be stressed whilst keeping the rhythm of the poem. The children's comparatively short utterances have been quite easy to incorporate into a poetic form. However, I occasionally added 'I like/think' to lengthen

some phrases. Regarding children's perceptions of 'quality' in nursery education, I used their opinions on what they liked and disliked about their nursery class. Many children responded by saying 'I don't know' when talking about what they disliked, and these utterance might be interpreted either as the inability to make a response, or that the children were 'satisfied' with their nursery class.

Since comparisons of perceptions in the different nursery classes are to be made, each poem takes on the same format. I have again used different fonts for different voices - ***my 'questions'*** - *parents* - children - staff - and the reader can interpret these visual images as s/he will. First, I offer the reader The Harrington Chorus.

* * *

The Harrington Chorus

Tell me, what do you think a nursery class is for?

Parent

To get them ready for school, I think,
It's not such a shock.

Children

I come to play.
Play things. Play.
I come to play on the bikes.

Parent

It's just such an ideal stepping block
For the big school.

Children

Play. Play.
I think I come
To do some painting.

Nursery Nurse

Give them experience
Before they go to main school.

Children

To play, I think.
I don't know.
Cos I have to go to school.

Parent

I think it makes 'em
More grown-up.

Children

I come to play
Everyday.
Cos my mummy brings me.

Teacher

I think to let children
Become independent.

Children

To play. Um ...
I think to play.
Cos I like playing.

Parent

They do cooking, painting, woodwork,
And 'e never stops talking.

Children

I come to play
In the soft play.
I don't know why I come.

Headteacher

Setting up the areas
To develop all their skills.

Children

I have to come
Because it's school.
I come to play Power Rangers!

And what is meant by quality?

Parent

Staffing levels would definitely be
The most important for me.

Children

Playing with sandcastles.
I like painting.
I like painting to go on the wall.

Parent

It's the teachers,
Definitely.

Children

Painting and gluing.
Going in the soft play.
I like playing on the bikes.

Teacher

I think you can feel it in the school,
The environment, you know.

Children

Playing in the home corner.
Playing with cars.
I like the blackboard and the books.

Parent

All the different activities
Like cooking and going out to play.

Children

Playing with the playdough.
I like cooking.
I like playing The Power Rangers.

Nursery Nurse The staff, and an environment where
The children are stable

Children Digging in the sand.
Playing in the home corner.
I don't like dressing up.

Parent *Equipment. I mean, nowadays*
You've got PCs and newer books

Children Playing in the book corner.
Jigsaws I like.
I don't like people pinching me.

Parent *Like, 'e came 'ome with bruises*
On 'is back, all up the spine

Children When they pinch me.
Someone who hits me.
I don't like the horrible things.

Headteacher I would expect, if you could get it,
Perfection everywhere

Children I don't like people pushing me
And chasing me
And pinching me.

* * *

My interpretation

Firstly, considering perceptions of the purposes of nursery education, parents' emphasis on *preparation for school*, was echoed by the nursery

nurse (Jackie). But whilst some of the children mentioned that they had to go to nursery because it was school, the majority considered the reason for their attendance was so that they could *play*.

Both mothers and fathers suggested that nursery class attendance had beneficial effects on certain characteristics in their children. Anne's comments regarding children's increased independence resulting from nursery class experience were in agreement with those of 'middle-class' parents. Her emphasis on independence and 'independent' learning, coupled with Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe's notions regarding the provision of different areas in which children could develop skills, were congruent with my observations of the great variety of equipment in the classroom with which the children interacted, although with little adult support (Chapter Four).

Mothers and fathers were aware of the many different activities their children encountered within the nursery classroom, an understanding which may have developed through the degree of openness of the class to parents (Chapter Four - 'Checking In'). The variety of activities available is also evident in the children's responses relating to what they liked and disliked about their nursery class, and their reasons for attendance.

Parents placed emphasis on *staff* (ratios, personality, training) as being associated with 'quality'. On the other hand, Anne (nursery teacher) stressed the *environment and ethos* as being a salient 'quality' indicator, and Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe emphasised 'perfection

everywhere'. Certainly, I observed evidence of 'perfection' in terms of decor, resources, facilities etc. But such perfection was not evident in the behaviour of some of the children. As illustrated in my description in Chapter Four, aggressive acts were quite a regular occurrence. Some parents, when discussing discipline as an indicator of 'quality', mentioned this anti-social behaviour and the effects such behaviour had on their children (one verse in the poem illustrates such concerns). But it is the children who have voiced their opinions on this issue most forcefully. And so my findings 'crystallise': my voice informed by my observations; parents' voices influenced by their observations of their children; children's voices evolved through their interactions with the microsystem; all come together to form the facets of the crystal. But the staff are not elements in this compound. Jackie (nursery nurse) mentioned a 'stable' environment for the children, but referred to this aspect in terms of a routine. Anne and Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe talked of a happy atmosphere (not in poem) as being a 'quality' indicator. But in practice (from my observations) more effort seemed to be expended in obtaining 'perfection' in the *appearance* of the surroundings than in interactions with the children.

I now offer the reader the chorus which 'rang out' from Catsbury.

* * *

The Catsbury Chorus

Tell me, what do you think a nursery class is for?

Parent
Well, the children learn
So many different things.

Children
I think I come
Cos it's school.
Cos Mummy brings me in the car.

Parent
And they do the things
They couldn't do at home.

Children
I come I think
To make things.
I come because it's school.

Headteacher
The main purpose has to be
Socialisation ..... caring.

Children
We come, I think,
For playing.
Cos I come to school.

Parent
They experience being
With all the other children.

Children
Well, I come here
To learn things.
I don't know why I come.

Nursery Nurse
They'll be a bit more confident
When they move to main school.

Children

Use the bricks.
I don't know.
I come because I like it.

Parent

Well I know it brings 'em out
For when they start school.

Children

Come to school.
Play with things.
I come to do a painting.

Parent

Like they show more interest
And they never stop talking.

Children

I come to play.
I have to come.
Cos it's school day.

Teacher

I think it's very important
That the children have self-esteem.

Children

To come to school.
Cos Mummy wants me to.
Bye!

And what do you think is quality?

Parent

Well, I think quality
Is in the teachers.

Children

Playing with the farm.

	Play in the Wendy House. I like playing in the area [home corner].
Parent	*If the teachers weren't good* *They'd all be running riot.*
Children	I like sticking. Playing with the sand. I like going outside.
Nursery Nurse	How the staff work, How well they cope.
Children	Making pictures. Playing up the area. I like all the farm animals.
Parent	*It's all the things they do.* *They loved the farm.*
Children	Playing outside. I don't know. I just don't like it on the chairs.
Headteacher	I know it when I see it. It's to do with ethos.
Children	I don't like Getting told off. I do like playing outside.
Parent	*Reading and writing .... seems to be* *A problem nowadays.*
Children	I don't like playing

In the area.
I do like playing with the farm.

Teacher A setting where
Children are valued.

Children Playing cars.
I like painting.
I like playing with these phones!

* * *

My interpretation

Like those at Harrington, parents at Catsbury demonstrated their awareness of all the different activities in which their children engaged in the nursery classroom. That the staff generated an 'open' ethos, meant that parents had day-to-day experience of their children's classroom. Mr Kitson (headteacher) stressed the important role of the nursery staff in encouraging home/school links, and suggested 'ethos' as an important 'quality' indicator. Certainly, a warm, friendly atmosphere was evident in the classroom (see 'The Meeting Place'). Such practice enhances mesosytem interactions (home-school).

The children put forward a variety of reasons for their attendance, including access to different activities. As mentioned in Chapter Seven, a sizeable proportion of children said that they had to attend nursery class because it was school. Parents suggested that nursery education provided

preparation for school, in agreement with Susan (nursery nurse). A crystal forms.

Pam's intolerance of *aggression* (observed - Chapter Four - when one girl pushed in front of another whilst running through a doorway; voiced - Chapter Five), was echoed in the responses of the children and parents who made no mention of this issue. A crystal forms once more.

Parents stressed the importance of the 'quality' of the staff, as did Susan (nursery nurse). However, as mentioned in Chapter Six, parents in *one* focus group placed great emphasis on the learning of *academic* skills as being a feature of 'quality' in nursery education, this issue being represented as one verse in the poem. None of the staff mentioned academic skills, either as a purpose of, or 'quality' indicator in, nursery education. Whilst, the children had much indirect experience with letters and numbers through such things as name labels, books, the 'writing' table, number games and rhymes, none talked of activities involving numeracy and literacy skills.

Much of what was said by both parents and, not surprisingly, staff was in line with the school's written nursery policy and the information given in the parent booklet. Whilst accepting that these texts are designed to inform participants, I have to consider the possibility of 'revision' taking place prior to the interviews as an effect of the research process on perceptions.

I move the reader on to 'listen' to the chorus of voices which emanated from Fiddlebrooke.

* * *

The Fiddlebrooke Chorus

Tell me, what is a nursery class for?

Parent *They start to learn their letters*
Which starts them off for school.

Children I don't know.
I don't know
I come because I'm big enough.

Parent *Doing their letters; things like that.*
She doesn't say much about it.

Children I don't know.
Because I do.
Cos there's things to play with.

Headteacher I think to give them experiences
They would not have at home.

Children I don't know.
Because I'm four.
I come to do some painting.

Parent *They want to learn their letters,*
Numbers ... to read and write.

Children

I don't know.
I come to play.
I come because it's school.

Parent

They seem to be
Much more grown-up.

Children

No. No.
I don't know.
I think I come to draw.

Nursery Nurse

Preparation for school
And to socialise as well.

Children

I don't know
Why I come.
I think I come to play.

Parent

The main thing has got to be
Social interaction.

Children

I don't know.
Because I do.
Cos there's things to play with.

Teacher

In an area like this
It helps language and social skills.

Children

I don't know.
I don't know.
I don't know.

And what do you think is quality?

Parent

Staff who are qualified
To teach this age group.

Children

Playing with sticklebricks
Painting pictures.
I like playing with the car track.

Parent

It has to be
The number of teachers.

Children

I like painting.
Playing with cars.
Um .... playing with the train set.

Nursery Nurse

Staff being qualified.
A good staff ratio.

Children

Painting. Painting.
Playing in the house.
I like making cakes.

Parent

Well quality
Is what they learn.

Children

I don't know.
I don't know.
I don't like the train set.

Headteacher

The child who has confidence
To tackle new work.

Children I don't know.
No. No.
The animals, I like.

Parent *The way they teach them*
And the way they are with them.

Children Painting and writing.
I don't know.
I like P.E. in the hall.

Teacher Quality is an environment which
Is safe and reliable.

Children Nothing. No.
I don't know.
Some things I don't like.

* * *

My interpretation

Parents placed emphasis on the learning of *academic* skills as an important purpose of nursery education. One child said that she liked 'writing', but staff did not mention this aspect. The 'Letterland' scheme formed part of the curriculum, and I observed carpet sessions and table activities relating to the scheme (see Chapter Four). Children did not mention this scheme. Whilst parents talked about their children's learning of the Letterland characters and letters, they did not mention any of the other activities which I observed the children engaged in; this may have

been due to the lack of openness of the classroom to parents (as illustrated in 'All Present and Correct', Chapter Four) and is considered in greater depth in the concluding discussion of the present chapter.

Whilst Carol (nursery nurse) made comments which were in agreement with parents relating to *preparation for school* as being a purpose of nursery education, neither Beatrice (nursery teacher) nor Miss Priday (headteacher) did. Similarly, Carol mentioned qualified staff and good staff ratios as being indicators of 'quality', as did parents; such notions were not put forward by Beatrice and Miss Priday. Here is an example of an issue discussed earlier; the nursery nurse's perceptions were more in line with those of parents than were the headteacher's and the nursery teacher's.

A significant proportion (40%) of the children did not know why they attended nursery class, and a greater proportion (90%) were unable to put forward opinions of what they did not like, issues which will be discussed later.

Crystals have not differentiated in my data from Fiddlebrooke in quite the way they did for Harrington and Catsbury, and I feel as if I am left with an almost amorphous compound.

Gazing into crystals: perceptions in context

The children, parents and staff have revealed their own perceptions of nursery education and, in the present study, the construction of those

perceptions has occurred in three different contexts; three microsystems offering different physical attributes and patterns of relationships and activities, and each interacting with other systems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) underlines the importance of the way in which the environment is perceived by an individual. Such perceptions may influence an individual's interactions with the environment which may have implications for her/his social, emotional and cognitive development.

Perceptions and facets of behaviour

At Harrington the majority of the children perceived that the reason for their attendance at nursery class was to play. I observed much 'rough and tumble' play at Harrington. The almost totally unrestrained nature of the children's activities may have caused them to perceive the purpose of attendance at nursery class as being to 'play'. The *low levels of adult interaction* which I observed and the *large area of the classroom* may have contributed to the 'playing out' ethos (Finch, 1984). The development of these children's perceptions of their nursery class environment may have affected the way in which they interacted with the setting. And so a cyclical process is evident; characteristics of the microsystem (large area and low levels of adult interaction) evoke perceptions in the children (e.g. 'we can run around and tumble about') which cause them to interact and behave in a particular way, which, in turn, affects the characteristics of the microsystem ('playing out' ethos), and this reinforces their perceptions, so that the behaviour is perpetuated.

At Catsbury and Fiddlebrooke fewer children mentioned play as a reason for attendance, and yet I observed them to be engaged in play. I suggest the higher levels of adult interaction which I observed at Catsbury and Fiddlebrooke, and/or the smaller classroom size, may have been influential in evoking these children's perceptions.

Both children and parents at Harrington mentioned aggression in the classroom, and I observed acts of aggressive behaviour. These went unremarked by staff at the time or in interviews. Such comments were not made by parents and children at Catsbury and Fiddlebrooke. As I said earlier, at Harrington there appeared to me to be a 'playing-out' ethos; this ethos may have permitted the perpetration of aggressive acts.

'Scientist Me' suggests a *temporal macrosystem* influence here. At the time the study took place, a children's television programme 'The Power Rangers' was extremely popular in the UK. Concerns over the programme's effects on children's behaviour were evident in the media. This programme featured fictional characters who used weapons and engaged in aggressive acts of the type used in karate. Exposure to violent images on television may evoke aggressive behaviours in children and adolescents (see for example, Atkin, 1984; Comstock and Strasburger, 1990; De-Koning et al., 1990). Such reports are congruent with 'modelling' behaviour, as described in Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1992, p.17). However, counter empirical evidence exists which suggests that there are no links between aggressive behaviour and

violent television programmes (see for example, Lynne et al., 1989; Sawin, 1990; Wiegman et al., 1992). Some children at Harrington mentioned that they liked playing 'Power Rangers', and indeed I observed many play bouts in which some children were emulating the programme's characters in their behaviour. I did not observe these games at Fiddlebrooke and Catsbury. But I assume that the majority of the children in the three schools had been exposed to the TV programme (in fact a toy Power Ranger figure was brought into the classroom at Catsbury - see 'The Meeting Place'). Hence, I suggest that attributes of the microsystem may exert such an influence as to counteract a macrosystem interaction (Power Rangers 'craze'- TV), as in the case of Catsbury and Fiddlebrooke, or to encourage it, as at Harrington. This suggestion might explain the inconsistencies in findings from studies into the links between TV violence and aggressive behaviour. I suggest that future studies into the effect of television on behaviour should adopt an ecological perspective, in which the context and processes within the different system levels are taken into account. Particularly attention should be paid to the contextual attributes of, and processes occurring in, the microsystem in which the behaviour is observed. In the present study, the macrosystem interaction (Power Rangers 'craze'- TV) may have affected behaviours within a specific microsystem (Harrington) in which those behaviours were *permitted* to develop, such that children's and parents' perceptions of that microsystem were influenced.

Children's ability to talk about their nursery class experience

Forty percent of the children interviewed at Fiddlebrooke, compared to 13% at both Catsbury and Harrington, were unable to give reasons for their attendance, even though the average age of the children at Fiddlebrooke was higher and, on average, they had had longer experience in the nursery class. I suggest that the low cognitive demand of the regime imposed upon the children at Fiddlebrooke could have been responsible for the fact that a large proportion of the children were unable to give reasons for their attendance. The style of teaching and learning at Catsbury was such that children were encouraged to reflect upon what they were doing, or had done, in the classroom. At Harrington the children discussed and reflected on what they had done during assessment activities. Such reinforcement of their nursery experience may have further assisted children at Harrington and Catsbury in their ability to make responses regarding why they attend nursery class. Interestingly, Pramling (1996) demonstrates how 5 and 6 year-old pre-school children in Sweden, whose teachers adopt teaching strategies which encourage reflection, are more likely to develop metacognitive skills relating to their learning than children whose teachers do not employ such methods. The present study may have uncovered similar processes occurring in Harrington and Catsbury, in that the children seemed more able to hypothesise reasons for their attendance.

A large proportion (90%) of the children at Fiddlebrooke responded by saying 'I don't know' or 'No' when asked what they disliked in nursery class. Fiddlebrooke children were restricted in their choices of activities and were used to having decisions made for them by adults, whereas those at Catsbury and Harrington enjoyed high levels of autonomy in their activities. The children at Fiddlebrooke may have been so unused to expressing their opinions, whether verbally or through actually making choices, that they were fearful of voicing their disapproval.

Parents and children talking

Interactions with staff may not be the only means through which the children had the opportunity to reflect on their experience. Parents at Fiddlebrooke said that their children did not talk about their experience in nursery class, except for some mentioning Letterland characters. Conversely, parents at Catsbury and Harrington said that their children regularly talked of their experiences in nursery class. The teachers at Catsbury and Harrington worked within the philosophies of a child-centred pedagogy, emphasising independent learning, although each interpreted these differently. I suggest that children at Catsbury and Harrington may have found the activities offered to them more interesting and stimulating than did the children at Fiddlebrooke. At both Catsbury and Harrington a wide variety of activities was available, and the children had greater freedom to choose what they wanted to do than those at

Fiddlebrooke. The children at Catsbury and Harrington were therefore more likely to engage in those activities in which they were interested, which were meaningful and which they found gratifying. Bronfenbrenner (1979) maintains that:

> ...the optimal situation for learning and development is one in which the balance of power gradually shifts in favour of the developing person, in other words, when the latter is given increasing opportunity to exercise control over the situation (p.58)

Such empowerment, evident from my observations at Catsbury and Harrington, may have enhanced the children's willingness to talk to their parents about their activities in the classroom.

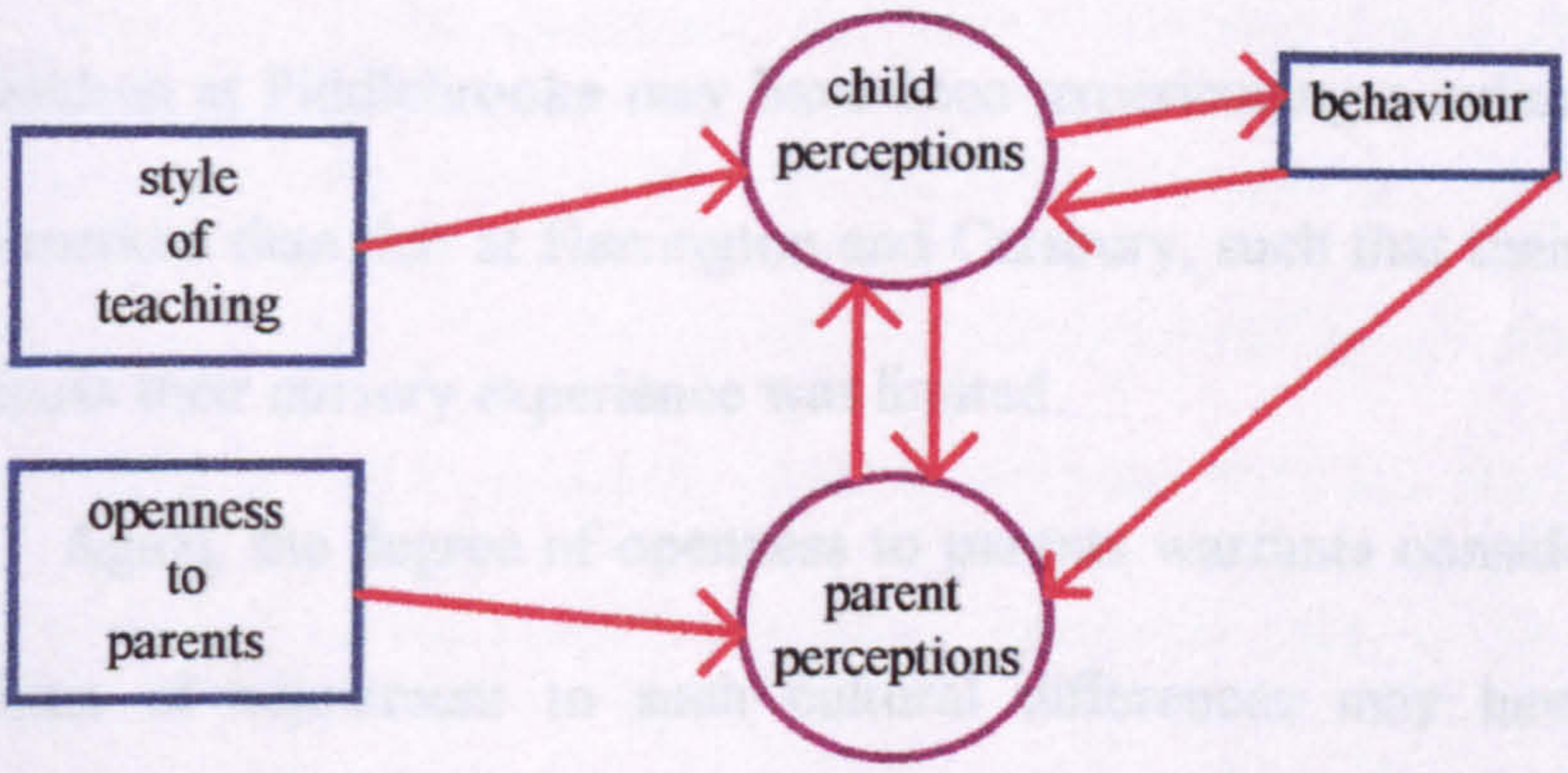
Parents at Harrington and Catsbury seemed to have greater knowledge of all the activities in which their children engaged in nursery class compared to those at Fiddlebrooke. As suggested earlier, this may have been due to the open nature of the classes at Harrington and Catsbury. I suggest that knowledge of their children's nursery experiences may have resulted in parents' ability to initiate discussion and/or sustain *child-initiated* conversations mentioned above.

The importance of these dyadic interactions is highlighted by Bronfenbrenner (1979). He contends that these reciprocal relationships may effectuate two-way developmental processes, for 'if one member of the pair undergoes a process of development, the other does also' (p.5). Therefore, a dynamic system results in which not only the child develops, but also the parent. I suggest parent and child perceptions may have

further developed through such reciprocal interactions, and hence, children at Harrington and Catsbury were more able to posit reasons for their attendance and discuss their dislikes, than those at Fiddlebrooke.

The interactions seem complex. I have attempted to summarise those so far considered in Figure 8.3.

Figure 8.3



Taking a closer look into structure of the crystal

On closer inspection the crystal structure appears even more intricate. Certain characteristics and beliefs of significant others in the microsystem are also 'visible' in the crystal lattice.

Negative assumptions about low socio-economic group parents' interest in their children and the children's cognitive abilities, were evident amongst some staff in nursery classes visited during the survey, and were also voiced by Beatrice (nursery teacher) and Miss Priday (headteacher) at Fiddlebrooke (see Chapter Five and The Fiddlebrooke

Chorus). Staff attitudes towards children and parents from lower socio-economic groups might influence their perceptions of nursery education. Beatrice seemed to be operating a deficit model in her pedagogical style in that the children were instructed in activities which may have been designed to overcome *perceived* inadequacies. The curriculum seemed not to be one which built on children's previous experiences or operated within a context necessarily meaningful to the children (for example, the adult-generated topic 'Autumn'). Hence, I suggest that the majority of the children at Fiddlebrooke may have been experiencing a cultural shift more marked than that at Harrington and Catsbury, such that their ability to discuss their nursery experience was limited.

Again, the degree of openness to parents warrants consideration. Problems of adjustment to such cultural differences may have been exacerbated by lack of involvement of parents in the workings of the nursery class at Fiddlebrooke. Bronfenbrenner (1979) makes the following hypothesis relating to such a mesosystem interaction:

> The developmental potential of a setting is increased as a function of the number of supportive links between that setting and other settings (such as home and family). Thus the least favourable condition for development is one in which supplementary links are either nonsupportive or completely absent - when the mesosystem is weakly linked (p.215).

Whilst the nursery teacher and headteacher at Fiddlebrooke seemed to perceive that they were working to counteract the effects of

disadvantage, such perceptions were not evident at Catsbury and Harrington, either in the regimes observed or in the opinions expressed by staff, despite their similar catchment areas. Turning the crystal we 'see' an even more intricate network of inclusions which might have differential effects in the microsystem.

A network of crystalline inclusions: roles, experience and interpersonal relationships

In all the classes the nursery nurses took on a passive role in matters such as organisation of the classroom, curriculum planning and assessment. They supported the nursery teachers and had responsibility for most of the domestic duties. Yet, the nursery nurses' training background might be conceived as more oriented towards working with the nursery age group than that of the nursery teachers. Since the role of the nursery nurses was a subordinate one, it might be assumed that characteristics of the microsystem were more greatly influenced by the attitudes, philosophies and beliefs of the nursery teacher. Therefore, the training background of the nursery teacher (which might be considered an exosystem interaction) warrants consideration.

None of the teachers had received much in-service training (LEA - macrosystem interaction). A description of their initial training background and experience is given in Chapter Four, but I have summarised these in Table 8.2 (over).

Of the three nursery teachers discussed in the present study, Beatrice at Fiddlebrooke had had the least training and the least

background experience relating to the nursery age range. She taught in ways that might be considered developmentally inappropriate (DES, 1990; Dowling, 1992) and her class was not open to parents. Her lack of appropriate training therefore may have been responsible for some of the processes occurring within the microsystem. The Education Science and Arts Committee (ESAC, 1986) recommends that teacher training should include the development of teachers' interpersonal skills, not only with children, but also with other adults. Similarly, Bernhard (1996) indicates the need for the inclusion of training in *cultural awareness*. Such input might encourage teachers' willingness to make their classrooms open to parents.

Table 8.2

Nursery Teachers' Initial Teacher Training and Background Experience

TEACHER	INITIAL TRAINING	EXPERIENCE
Anne - Harrington	3-7 years age group	32 years - mainly reception classes - lower SEG catchments
Pam - Catsbury	5-7 years age group*	28 years - mainly reception classes - lower SEG catchments
Beatrice - Fiddlebrooke	7-11 years age group	28 years - junior and some infant classes, but always found herself being allocated work with older children - middle-class catchments

* had received much help and advice from her sister who was headteacher in a nursery school in a different LEA.

At Harrington, Anne's role as deputy headteacher of the main school needs to be considered. Moxon et al. (1991) indicate problems of conflicts between managerial and teaching roles for teachers and headteachers in nursery schools and nursery centres. Anne's involvement in administrative duties meant that she did not devote all her time to teaching. Hence an exosystem interaction is evident in that Anne's role outside the nursery class influenced characteristics of the microsystem (low levels of adult interaction). But Anne did not see this as a problem, commenting that the nursery 'could run by itself', a perception linked to her pedagogical philosophy of independent learning.

But top-down processes operating within the schools also need to be considered. Characteristics of the relationship between *headteachers* and *nursery teachers* might have affected patterns of activities within the microsystem. As mentioned in Chapter Seven, Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe and Anne (Harrington) had worked together in setting up the nursery. The two women worked very much as a partnership. However, Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe's expectation of 'perfection everywhere' (see Harrington Chorus) may have been partly responsible for a tendency in staff to keep the nursery classroom in immaculate condition. Therefore, less time was spent in interaction with the children, a situation which may have further catalysed the 'playing-out ethos' discussed earlier. Hence, Mrs Hawksworth-Smythe's attitude may have indirectly affected children's perceptions of the nursery class.

At Catsbury, Mr Kitson (headteacher) perceived Pam (nursery teacher) as an expert in the education of young children. Pam had been responsible for setting up the nursery class, whilst Mr Kitson took on the role of a somewhat detached overseer. His lack of 'interference' in the workings of the nursery class were seen as beneficial by Pam, who felt that she could work within her own ideological and philosophical framework. Therefore, I suggest that the headteacher's attitude and relationship with the nursery staff might be seen as influencing characteristics of the microsystem, which in turn influence the perceptions of the children and parents.

A very different relationship between headteacher and nursery teacher was apparent at Fiddlebrooke. Miss Priday seemed to control all that occurred within the classroom: she met parents before the children started school - Beatrice did not; letters to parents had to be checked by her; she bought equipment for the nursery without consulting staff etc. I suggest the adoption of such a powerful role may have had a deleterious effect on staff esteem and confidence. Bronfenbrenner suggests:

> The greater the degree of power socially sanctioned for a given role, the greater the tendency for the role occupant to exercise and exploit that power and for those in a subordinate position to respond by increased submission, dependency, and lack of initiative (1979, p. 92).

Miss Priday's adoption of a dictatorial role may have influenced Beatrice's performance in the classroom. Such an influence, combined

with Beatrice's lack of training, may have caused her to adopt a pedagogical style with which she felt 'safe' and in which she was in control. Perhaps a more democratic style of leadership within the school as a whole would have encouraged Beatrice to exercise greater democracy in the classroom. Again the attitudes of the headteacher can be seen to impact upon attributes of the microsystem, which in turn may have influenced both children's and parents' perceptions.

Crystal solutions?

The research process has enabled me to bring together a chorus of voices to crystallise perceptions. But there is no definitive solution. Instead an open tentativeness remains.

Considering the possible interactions discussed in the crystallisation process above, together with *my interpretations* and *suggestions* given in previous chapters, the complexity of the processes which might influence the development of perceptions of nursery education is revealed. If the structure of the crystals is considered as being formed by the research process, then I will put them back into the solutions from which they differentiated. In these solutions are some of the 'ions' influencing the crystalline form. My qualitative models representing crystals in solutions are given in Figures 8.4 and 8.5 (over).

Figure 8.4

A Crystal of Perceptions of the Purposes of Nursery Education in 'Solution'

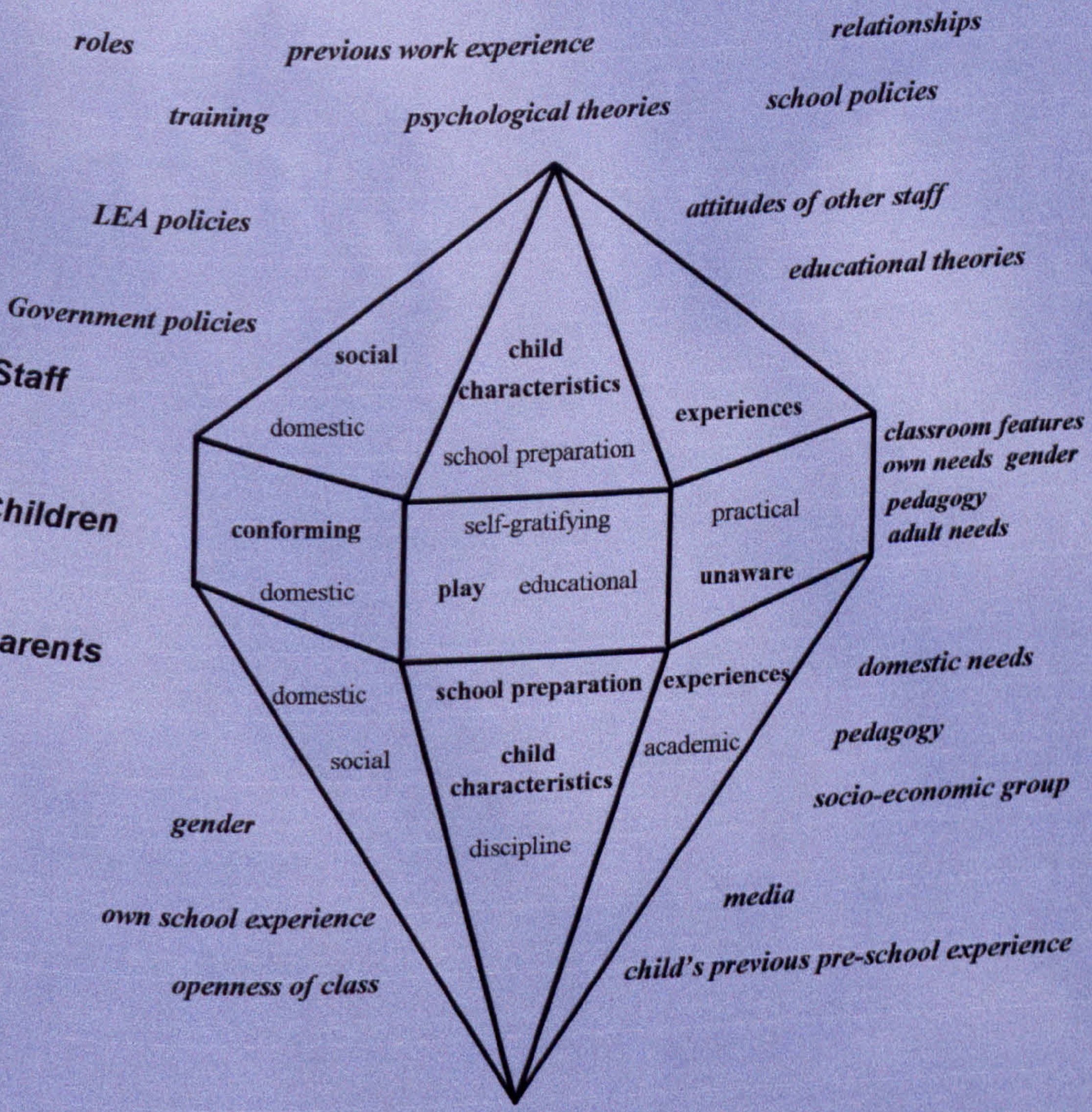
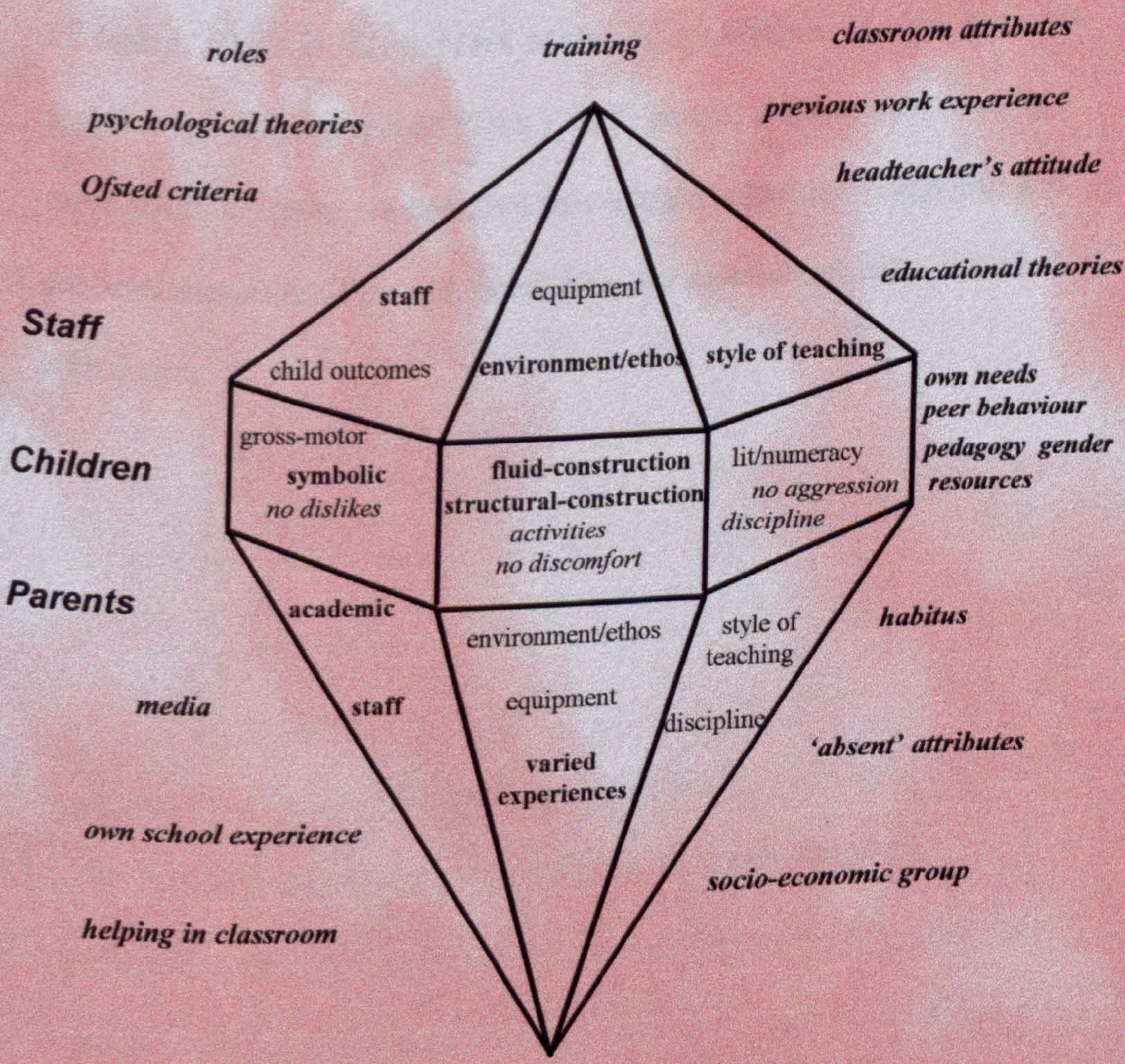


Figure 8.5

A Crystal of Perceptions of 'Quality' in Nursery Education in 'Solution'



Diamonds or quartz?

So some crystals have formed. But the complexity of each crystalline structure is apparent. As we gaze through the various facets, perspectives change: multiple ways of looking; multiple interactions; multiple ways of knowing; multiple realities; multiple interpretations. Sometimes impurities in the crystals cause refraction, so that we cannot be sure whether we are seeing, perceiving, interpreting the 'true picture' of reality. Such is the complex nature of my crystals. I have brought together the different perspectives - staff, parent, child and my own, but these multiple truths are coloured by multiple impurities (baggage), and are both encapsulated in, and clouded by, the research process. I am left with quartz.

Chapter Nine

Reflections

Looking through snapshots: does the camera lie?

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

Algernon Moncrieff in 'The Importance of Being Earnest', (Act I, [p.352]) Oscar Wilde (1895 republished 1930)

Whilst having revealed the subjective nature of my research, I feel I need to discuss what Janesick (1994) terms 'the trinity' (p.216) - validity, generalisability and reliability - indicating to readers, perhaps imbued by different epistemological stances, that these issues have been considered in my research. In 'qualitative' research (I suspend the term 'qualitative' in quotation marks, since it signifies a broad range of approaches with different epistemological and ontological underpinnings), the terms 'credibility', 'transferability' and 'dependability' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.278-279) are sometimes

adopted in discussions of legitimation. However, since these terms are often employed as if interchangeable with 'validity', 'generalisability' and 'reliability', I will use the latter in the following discussion.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) point out that, besides a crisis in representation, there is a crisis of legitimation in qualitative research which:

> makes traditional criteria for evaluating and interpreting qualitative research problematic. ... It involves a serious rethinking of the terms validity, generalisability and reliability (p.11).

Wolcott (1990) contends the assessment criteria for establishing validity are inappropriate for 'qualitative' research, pointing out that validity was, and is, associated with measurement and testing in psychological research. This contention is sustained by Scheurich (1996) who maintains that postpositivists have simply transported 'conventional science [positivist] concerns, regulations or truth claims into a postpositivist frame' (p.50).

A question of geometry

Lather (1986, p.78) asserts the need to establish 'trustworthiness' of 'qualitative' data, one means of achieving this being through triangulation, using a variety of 'methods, data sources, and theories'. With the intention of triangulating my findings, I gathered data from a variety of sources, through different methods - observation, interviewing different groups, document analysis - which provided a rich source of information to be compared and contrasted. However, during analysis

and writing, the heterogeneous, somewhat contradictory and ambiguous nature of my data became apparent. But surely this does not mean that my data lack 'validity' and 'reliability'? The information I recorded was that which I saw, heard and tape recorded. I could look for instances of agreement and 'sameness', but such practice would cause me to ignore *differences* and the *multiplicity* of perspectives. After all, as mentioned in my section on writing, I wanted to illustrate 'perspectival relativity' (Tyler, 1986, p.127). I began deconstructing my own notions of 'validity', for I realised that I was guilty of carrying the 'trinity' in my baggage as I moved away from positivism. Hence, I turned to postmodernism. Postmodernists Scheurich (1996) and Richardson (1994) maintain that triangulation is congruent with scientific rhetoric which assumes 'that there is a "fixed point" or "object" that can be triangulated' (Richardson, 1994, p.522). As mentioned in Chapter Eight, Richardson (1994) proposes 'crystallisation' (p.522) rather than triangulation. So, for example, using participants' own words in the form of poetry, served to bring together these different perspectives, and hence 'crystallise' my findings.

Insider 'truths'?

Janesick (1994) points out that 'member checks' (p.216) are often applied to qualitative data, but that these are done within the assumptions of the quantitative paradigm. Whilst I was engaged in the last phase of my research, still carrying the 'trinity' in my baggage, I

gave copies of transcripts to participants, asking them to verify that the transcripts offered an accurate account of what was said. I gave them the opportunity to comment or enlarge upon anything in the text. However, none disagreed with what had been written or wanted to change anything.

One means of establishing the trustworthiness of the presentation of my findings would be to allow participants to read the final account. Whilst I did give the nursery staff *some* of my vignettes, the whole account may have caused upset to some, and could possibly have made the production of the thesis problematic. Richardson (1992b) warns against such practice, saying that letting your participants read and comment on your work is:

> ...a false universal and a shallow resolution because it elides over complexities of the human practices that constitute research (p.108).

Coffey (1996) highlights the difficulties she encountered when her hosts contested the authenticity of her text, making the construction of the final work problematic, since some sections had to be removed.

Playing 'Snap' with snapshots

A second person might be employed as co-observer or co-analyser in order that levels of 'agreement' might be assessed, and 'validity' and 'reliability' checked (Robson, 1993). Again, such practice can be seen to be an immigrant from the positivists' domain, and assumes an objective reality and universal truth. Inter-observer agreement

acknowledges 'sameness' and ignores difference. So much can rely upon the congruence of the researchers' backgrounds, as Erickson (1986) points out:

> If two observers with differing orientations were placed in the same spot to observe what was ostensibly the 'same' behaviour performed by the 'same' individuals, the observers would write substantively differing accounts of what had happened (p.120).

Similarly, in my analysis I have worked within my own frame of reference, influenced by what Polkinghorne (1983, p.103) refers to as 'Weltanschauung' [world outlook]. Marton (1988a) maintains that because categories of description emerge as a result of the creative activity of the researcher, others are not likely come to the same end result. He does, however, suggest that once categories of description have been established, the researcher can ask a colleague to assign quotes to these in order to assess agreement. However, I agree with Gillen (1997), who maintains that high levels of agreement are probably indicative of commonalities in the researchers' backgrounds, and hence a fruitless pursuit. Disagreement by someone with a completely different 'Weltanschauung' would surely not deem my analysis unreliable. Wolcott (1990) maintains that he tries to improve the trustworthiness of his accounts by including some primary data so that readers have 'access to the data themselves' (p.129). In my attempts to produce a multivoiced text, I have included as much 'raw' data as

possible, enabling my participants to 'speak' and the reader to make her/his own interpretations.

Returning to the fields to look for the 'same'?

It might be argued by some that I should return to the settings after a period of time to establish the 'reliability' of my findings. However, there were time limits on my research. As I was about to start the third phase the LEA announced that it would begin a programme of in-service training for nursery staff during the following academic year. Since my research was concerned with perceptions *in context*, revisiting after some months would be problematic. Changes in macrosystem influences (LEA policy) might substantially affect characteristics of the microsystems. My intention was not to *evaluate* nursery education provision, in which case return to the settings after the introduction of in-service training might have been feasible, but to describe and interpret perceptions in different contexts.

I further justify my stance by referring back to Bronfenbrenner's (1992) formula for development, given in the discussion on ecological systems theory. His formulation stresses the dynamic nature of development within the ecological niche. Perceptions were developing and changing over time. In fact, I have suggested that perceptions may have changed during, and as a result of, the research process. Coffey (1996) mentions that she returned to her research setting (an office) a year after writing up her research, only to find that it had changed. She

questions her construction of her text as fiction, since she had written it after leaving the setting using her data. But I suggest that the dynamic nature of any setting is such that change, and therefore *difference*, is to be expected. Such a suggestion is in line with postmodernist thinking on research methods which 'appreciate the unrepeatable' (Rosenau, 1992, p.117).

Whilst tussling with my doubts over whether returning to the settings would be worthwhile, I wrote in my journal:

> ***In revisiting and triangulating we are looking for 'sameness' in an attempt to make our findings 'reliable' and 'valid'. However, in looking for 'sameness' we deny ourselves the many contradictions and differences which are a normal part of a developmental life.*** (entry - 5/11/96)

After writing this entry I was pleased to have my views endorsed in an article by a postmodernist, Scheurich (1996), who maintains that in seeking validity we are in search of the 'Same' and looking for 'regularity' (p.53) in our research, ignoring the possibility of the heterogeneous, the 'Other'.

Polkinghorne (1983) points out that 'human science is largely *ex post facto* understanding' and 'inescapably historical' (p.239). I consider my research to be a set of historical events in which the reader is invited to engage, identify with and reflect upon, interpreting as s/he will, but encountering my own interpretation. Through the use of thick description in parts of my text, I do not seek to validate or make

generalisations, but as Denzin (1989) puts it, to create '*verisimilitude* [my emphasis]: that is truthlike statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described' (p.83).

Looking through a camera lens which focuses on a mirror.

Lastly, I consider self-reflexivity in my consideration of the research process as a means of establishing the 'trustworthiness' of my research. Janesick (1994) contends that researchers are overly attentive to methodological procedures, terming this stance as '*methodolatry*, a combination of *method* and *idolatry*'[original emphasis] (p.215), asserting that findings are the most important aspect to be discussed. Whilst accepting the importance of findings, I maintain that the means through which they were obtained needs explanation. Miles and Huberman (1990) claim:

> The text by itself cannot inform us of just how it is connected to events it purports to portray. We need methodological accounts: we need the possibility of an 'audit trail' (p.348).

I hope that by providing a detailed methodological overview, in which I engage in self-reflexivity, I enable the reader to come to some understanding of the decisions I made, the changes in my thinking, and my impact on the research process and final text. In so doing, I hope to have engaged in what Wolcott (1990) describes as '*rigorous subjectivity*' (p.133), for I suggest research can only be accepted as a piece of history in which the researcher played a part.

An interlude

If I were to retrace my steps .....

If I could take a temporal shift backwards and carry out this research again, would I have done things in a different way? I find this question difficult to answer. As mentioned in Chapter One, the study was conceived within a political milieu in which there were suggestions by the Conservative Government that they would be introducing nursery vouchers (macrosystem influence), and hence might have been equated with market research. But the study went through a process of evolution as a result of ongoing findings and analysis, and through the change in my epistemological position.

I can say that I would use interviewing and observation as my major means of data gathering, giving equal importance to both. However, I admit to omissions in my research, which became apparent during analysis and writing, and which, if I were to do it again, I would have liked to fill.

Perhaps I should have attempted to get more documentary evidence from schools, such as termly and weekly curricular plans (although Harrington did not have these) and assessment lists etc., analysis of which might have been used to make comparisons with observations of style of teaching and learning and staff comments. However, I did not want to appear as if I was prying into the teachers'

practice. Staff might consider my perusal of such documentation comparable with an 'inspection'.

Perhaps I should have spent longer in the settings so that staff and children had longer to become more accustomed to my presence. However, there were time restraints on my study. Also, a longer stay at Fiddlebrooke, where I felt rather uncomfortable, might not have been possible, and indeed, the need to stay longer may have impeded access. I have made issue earlier in the thesis of the fact that the research should be considered as a piece of history, and that I should be accepted as part of the research, with all my 'infective baggage'. Here I call on personal experience of being observed in the classroom every Tuesday afternoon for a year by a member of staff from the local comprehensive, whose aim was to gain an understanding of the workings of the primary classroom. And Tuesday afternoons were *always* 'different'!

I have considered my lived experience of the research process, and given some consideration to this context for interpretation of perceptions. I have also considered the effects of the research process on participants. However, on reflection, it may have been fruitful to gain participants' perceptions of the research process. Whilst some parents said that they had enjoyed the focus groups and were grateful for being given a 'voice', and some children said that they had enjoyed using the telephones, I did not enquire of the staff as to their experience of the study. Asking participants about their own perceptions of the

research process would have added another group of voices to the polyphonic chorus.

Some parents have been silenced by the research process. By *inviting* some parents to focus groups, I have excluded others. Perhaps the process at Fiddlebrooke could be considered 'democratic' in that parents were asked to 'volunteer', although, in the event, the nursery teacher encouraged certain parents to take part. I could have sent out a questionnaire to other parents to give them an opportunity to 'voice' their opinions, but this would still exclude those parents with literacy problems. I further argue against the use of questionnaires by reminding the reader that, having previously used such an instrument to gain parents' views (Evans, 1993), I found data to be lacking in sufficient detail to consider the *context* of perceptions.

A collection of souvenirs?: a summary of 'findings'

The adoption of phenomenography has illustrated that there do seem to be a *limited number* of qualitatively different ways in which individuals perceive aspects of the world. Combining this approach with ecological systems theory has shown that these limited ways of perceiving a particular phenomenon can hold in different contexts. However, expressed perceptions seem to be influenced by many aspects of the different systems, and by the research process itself, these influences being dependent on the previous experience and personal characteristics of the individual; the relative nature of perceptions is thus highlighted.

I suggest that the telephone interviewing technique gave children the opportunity to choose whether they wanted to be interviewed or not, and may have enabled them to communicate at a higher developmental level than they might do through standard interviewing techniques. But I have to point out that because the telephone technique was successful for me, does not necessarily mean it will be the same for all. I personally am not averse to 'playing' and feel quite comfortable doing so; others may not. Ball (1990) points out the discrepancies which might occur in similar studies conducted by different researchers, asserting:

> The significant thing is that part of the explanation of the differences between the accounts is found in the nature of the interactions between the researchers and the researched's perceptions of the researchers (p.167).

I have considered the issue of textual representation as problematic, and have yet to find a solution. My involvement in trying to solve this problem has caused me to consider postmodernist perspectives. Yet I feel I have had to tread carefully in my writing, for I was restrained not only by the original theoretical framework within which the study was conceived, but by the very reasons for writing the thesis. That said, several issues have arisen during my deliberations on the writing process.

One issue was the problem of how much literature regarding previous research to include in the text. Relating my research to

findings from studies set within a positivistic paradigm, seems inappropriate. And, as I was attempting to foreground 'voice', the use of too much literature could have swamped voices.

However, what seems to have come out of my struggle with textual representation, is my own contention that researchers should not adopt 'zany', forced writing styles, just for the sake of doing something 'different'. The genre has to fit the data and analysis, and should develop naturally from the research process *and* the researcher. For me, this necessitates some kind of *emotional involvement* with the research, which impels me to let the reader know my 'knowing', or to present to the reader my 'knowing' in such a way that s/he can reconstruct it for her/himself. But the issue of the relinquishing of my power as author has also been subjected to my ruminations, and has not been achieved. I have attempted to decentre myself in some parts of the text, but am still wrestling with this problem.

I feel justified in saying that the 'findings' generated in my study could be considered as 'maybes', hence stressing the open tentativeness of the research exercise. And these 'maybes' cause me to consider issues for future research.

Moving forward

In considering issues for future research, I offer suggestions, but in no way think of them as ways of 'proving findings' from my study. Such notions would submit to closure. Perhaps future research might

generate more 'maybes' for future research to generate more 'maybes' ad infinitum. I take the opportunity of now providing 'A List of Possibilities'.

A List of Possibilities

- The research 'package' could be repeated in different types of pre-school context and involve different ethnic groups;

- The telephone interviewing technique might be employed to explore young children's perceptions of the meaning of play and of their concepts of 'school';

- More detailed comparisons than those approached in this study could be made between the telephone technique and other styles of interviewing;

- Staff and parent notions of what they consider children like and dislike about their nursery education might be explored, and compared with children's perceptions;

- Gender differences in children's perceptions of nursery education might be further explored in order to consider the influences of different styles of teaching and learning on gender differentiation;

- Further explorations into parents' own bad experiences of school might involve the production of a collaborative text;

- The formation of parent cultures in schools might be explored and participant perceptions sought.

[Post]script

Bryman (1984), when discussing researcher backgrounds, asserts 'Few researchers traverse the epistemological hiatus which opens up between research traditions' (p.80). I must be one of the 'few'. Since much of

the change in my thinking has occurred during analysis and the writing of this thesis, a deconstructive discussion of the research process and its underlying assumptions seems necessary. Such a discussion is complex. Denzin and Lincoln (1994a) maintain that 'Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity' (p.12). I add to this 'epistemological stance', and since mine has changed, so have my lenses. And to experience this change during the course of my project is particularly problematic, for the study was conceived within a different set of constructs to those called upon during the 'sense-making' of the data. I therefore offer two discussions - one resulting from my gaze through postpositivist lenses, the 'other' through those stained by postmodernism. But this is not a post-mortem examination of my research, for the before and after are intertwined at a beginning.

Inspired by Derrida's presentation of text in two columns, as in 'Glas' (Collins and Mayblin, 1996), I have placed the 'postpositivist' consideration on the left, and the 'postmodernist' consideration on the right. In this way I hope the two 'threads' might be conceived as interwoven and yet separate, so that the 'in-between-ness' (Maclure, 1997, p.315), and perhaps contradictory nature of the thesis, might be foregrounded. Such a seemingly paralogical discussion might further legitimate the research 'via fostering heterogeneity and refusing closure' (Lather, 1993, p.679).

The paradigmatic argument regarding appropriateness, and indeed correctness, of the employment of various research methodologies has been long running. Some maintain that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches may be used effectively to complement each other (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Robson, 1993) and/or to establish validity of research findings (Greene et al., 1989). However, the 'purists' (Firestone, 1987, p.17) reinforce the polarisation of the quantitative and qualitative paradigms, contending that any attempts to combine the two may give rise to spurious conclusions (Smith, 1983). Indeed, Leininger (1992) asserts 'Because the two paradigms are different in their philosophy, characteristics and goals, the two paradigms and their methods need to be valued, respected and used appropriately ..... The researcher should not mix research methods across paradigms, as it violates the purposes and integrity of the paradigms' (p.395). The current research does not fit easily into either pole of such a dichotomy. ... Firstly, the survey has features characteristic of both paradigms. Congruent with quantitative epistemology, the survey included a large number of cases, employed a checklist of pre-set categories and involved some quantification of data, hence abstracting (or 'objectifying') and generalising some findings. However, in line with qualitative epistemology, the data derived from observation and

'[T]he half-life of paradigms appears shorter and shorter as human affairs become increasingly complex' (Roseneau, 1992, p.183). This notion, combined with Packwood and Sikes' (1996) assertion that all theories are merely cultural artefacts, makes a 'discussion of paradigms' within a postmodern framework inappropriate. I therefore offer a descriptive deconstruction of my research process, but recognise poststructural arguments concerning inadequacies of language to portray meaning (Derrida, 1970) and limits of consciousness in self-critical reflection (Lather, 1993). .....Whilst, I have used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to structure the research, this has not been to the exclusion of other theories, thus providing multiple discourses which add to the 'chorus of voices each speaking their truths' (Packwood and Sikes, 1995, p.3). In this way I hope to 'decenter the researcher [myself] as the master [sic] of truth and justice' (Lather, 1993, p.680).

.....But can I deconstruct Bronfenbrenner's 'ecological systems theory' and reconstruct it from a postmodern perspective? The fact that his 'theory' changed from its first conception to its reformulation over a decade later, points to Bronfenbrenner's development over time, and is congruent with postmodern thinking regarding the instability of theories (Denzin, 1994). Bronfenbrenner's (1992) notion of the individual as a perceiving, developing, and active agent interacting with, and effecting change in, a given context which is simultaneously in a state of change as a result of a multitude of

informal interviewing were generally emic, idiographic and descriptive. Although a checklist was used, data gathering was such that it was open to new information. Typologies for 'openness to parents' and 'style of teaching and learning' were derived inductively from the data as the survey progressed, and through 'back-and-forth interplay' (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p.282), were used in subsequent observations, resulting in an increase in the number of categories. Towards the end of the survey, the categories reached 'saturation' (Hutchison, 1988, p.137); quantitative categories do not become saturated.

....Considering the last phase, again paradigmatic positioning is complex. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1992) as a framework for the research required the application of a context-bound, process-oriented research model. Employing phenomenography, in order to characterise child, and subsequently parent and staff, perceptions, may seem antithetical to Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context model. The generation of categories of description in phenomenography objectifies and, hence, decontextualises conceptions of thought, whereas Bronfenbrenner's model calls for the contextualisation of data. That the opinions of a large sample of children were sought, together with the opinions of a 'representative' sample of parents, makes the research congruent with the

factors, and which, in turn, acts upon the individual, highlights the ***dynamic, situated,*** *and* ***relative*** *nature of perceptions of reality as opposed to the acceptance of 'universal truths'. Attention to the impact of multiple systems on development is congruent with the postmodernist consideration of the influence of multiple* ***texts,*** *and the interaction of the systems comparable to the concept of* ***intertextuality.*** *I liken Bronfenbrenner's inclusion of macrosystem effects on development with the postmodernist views on the influence of the variety of* ***cultural texts*** *(films, television, books, newspapers, music etc.) on perceptions.*

.....And what of Marton and phenomenography? My use of categories of description to 'order' and 'analyse' my data might be considered contradictory to a postmodernist stance. However, I have tried to 'ground the categories in the lived experience of the people' (Richardson, 1990, p.51) and, by offering a self-reflexive account, have attempted to analyse my 'implicit moral stance' in producing these categories (Richardson, 1990, p.51). Whilst the categories of description point to the limited number of ways of perceiving, Marton indicates that these are qualitatively ***different,*** *hence emphasising multiplicity of meaning. Also, I consider Marton's (1988a) contention that the categories of description for a perceived phenomenon can change over time and context, as being congruent with postmodernist notions of the instability and multidimensionality of perceived realities, there being no fixed points of reference.*

.....Richardson (1990), however, deplores the use of '"baby stats", like

epistemological and ontological underpinnings of quantitative (positivist) methodology, assuming that generalisations can be made and universal truths obtained. The counting of responses within the various categories of description, the computation of percentages, expressed in graphical form, may have pushed the research into the positivists' domain. Also within a positivistic epistemological stance was the application of these abstracted conceptions of thought to the contexts of the three settings. However, obtaining a rich description through observation and the taking of field notes, has permitted the interpretation of the categories of description in context. Kleinman et al. (1994) argue 'field studies favour a social-organisational analysis, while interview studies favour a social-psychological analysis' (p.47). The present study places equal emphasis on data gathered through both methods, and perhaps illustrates the importance of considering perceptions **in context.**

.....Qualitative research is often criticised for lacking in structure and being unsystematic, whilst quantitative methods are criticised for being process-ignorant and context-stripped. Adopting phenomenography and ecological systems theory has given structure to the present research in an attempt to 'tighten' methodological procedure and analyses. The research does not fit easily into

percentages and frequency tables' (p.50). As mentioned earlier, I have used percentages and bar graphs to show 'patterns' of opinions. I argue such visual represention add to the ***'pastiche'*** *(Dickens, 1994, p.90) of the research text, and offer the reader additional means of interpretation.*

.....Using NUD.IST to code and classify perceptions could be considered outside postmodern sensibility. However, the program accentuates ***diversity*** *(Richards and Richards, 1994), and enables the exploration of many different perspectives. Also, it permits analysis at the level of the individual. And indeed, my analysis could be continued ad infinitum, congruent with a postmodern awareness of 'explicit incompleteness [and] tentativeness' (Lather, 1993, p.682).*

.....Visiting the nursery classes during the 'survey', I became aware of the great ***diversity*** *in provision. Whilst I could look for similarities using the checklist, I perceived many* ***differences*** *between the classes. Having originally intended to look for a 'representative sample' for further study, I found this impossible, for deep looking revealed heterogeneity; to me, each nursery appeared a unique setting, which could not simply be bundled with others into the 'Same' (Scheurich, 1996, p.53). I selected classes for their most obvious* ***differences****, so that any differences in the development of perceptions might be explored and described.*

.....Postmodernist issues of empowerment also infiltrate my research when interviewing my participants (Fontana and Frey, 1994), and in my construction of the final text for an audience. However, perhaps most importantly, my research is in line with postmodernists who 'do not

the polarised quantitative\ qualitative model, but instead endorses the existence of a **paradigmatic continuum** (Miles and Huberman, 1988).

advocate any one new way of doing and reporting; instead, they favour ***multiplicity of approaches'*** *(Fontana, 1994, p.220), endorsing a* ***methodological continuum.***

And so my deconstructions are reconstructed to arrive at the same point. But I continue in a state of 'in-between-ness' (Maclure, 1997); no 'label' can be attached to my research approach and presentation. For my construction of the research process is influenced by several different epistemological stances: feminism, hermeneutic phenomenology, poststructuralism, and particularly subjective constructivism, which together might place it into a postmodern framework.

* * *

I interrupt the text with a journal entry.

Damn! I've just found a section in Giddens(1987) in which he writes in two columns- 'schizophrenically splitting' (p.243) himself - I thought I had a good idea! (6/11/97).

And so like Fuller (1984), again I seem to have reinvented the wheel.

* * *

The title of my thesis can be deconstructed to reveal heterogeneity, multiple perspectives and difference. Appearing in my

'play' (I have Derrida (1970) in mind here) entitled 'Talking About Nursery Education' are:

my participants - staff
parents
children

the many 'mes'

some of the many texts which may influence our understandings

There are many voices.

But the subtitle, 'Perceptions in Context', puts the voices on a stage, the sets changing as the 'play' progresses. For my research must be considered not only in the context of the nursery settings and the broader social milieu, but also in its temporal context. Such an understanding takes account of the dynamic nature of perceptions, the research process and my development over time.

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Appendix A1

The checklist employed during the survey

NURSERY CLASS CHECKLIST

SCHOOL..... **DATE.....**

NO. ON ROLL..... **NO. IN NURSERY CLASS.....** **AGE RANGE.....**

ENVIRONMENT

Location - catchment area

Buildings - age, condition etc.

Number of classrooms

CLASSROOM

Size

Organisation of space

Facilities

Equipment and resources

What activities are the children engaged in ?

CURRICULUM

What does it contain?

Is there progression?

To what extent is it affected by the National Curriculum?

Are there pressures from staff further up the school to include certain items in the curriculum?

STAFF

No. of trained staff (qualifications)

No. of untrained staff

How are staff deployed?

TEACHING AND LEARNING STYLES

How do the children learn?
(child-centred, formal)

How is the session organised?

How is learning managed?

How much contact do children have with adults?

How do staff manage behaviour?

ASSESSMENT AND RECORD KEEPING

How are children assessed?

What types of records are kept?

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

How are parents involved in the work of the nursery class?

What arrangements are made for parents and staff to meet?

How do staff try to ease the transition from home to school?

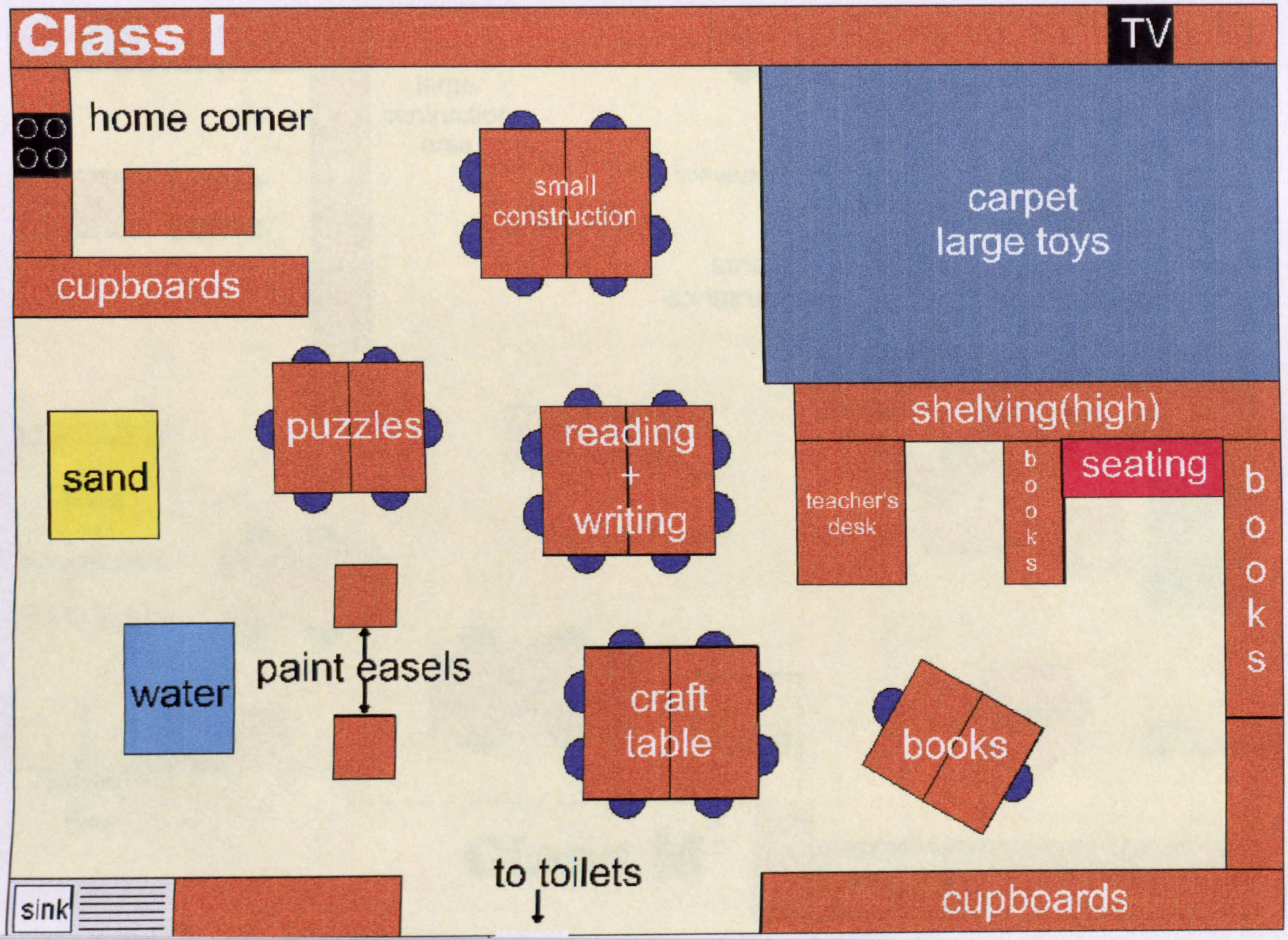
ENTRY INTO SCHOOL

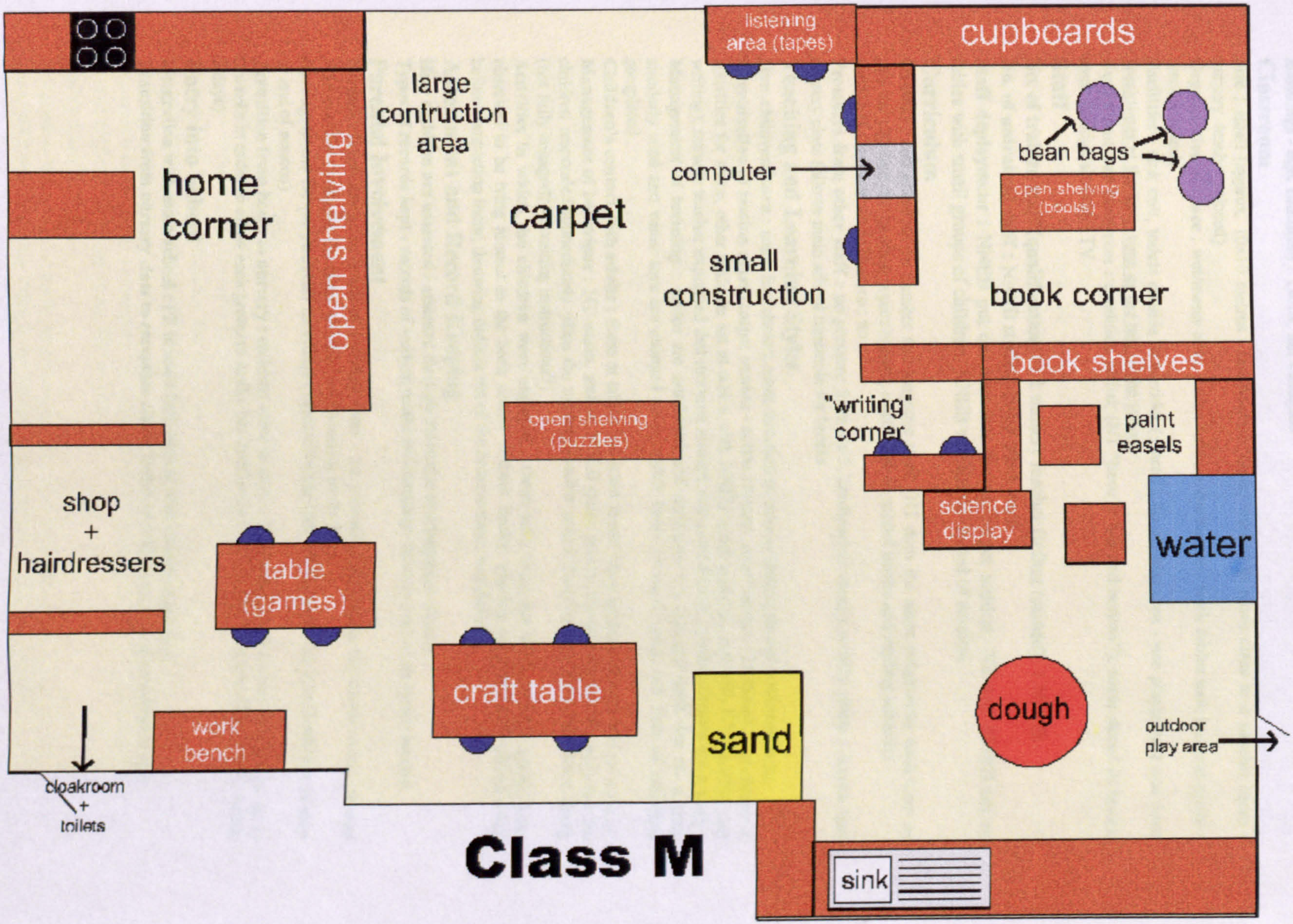
To what extent does the nursery class integrate with the main school?

How do staff try to ease the transition from nursery class to infant class?

Appendix A2

Floor plans and descriptions of two nursery classes which, although both housed in former infant classrooms, offered different learning experiences for the children.


Class I
TV
home corner
small construction
carpet
large toys
cupboards
puzzles
reading + writing
shelving(high)
sand
teacher's desk
books
seating
books
water
paint easels
craft table
books
to toilets
sink
cupboards


listening area (tapes)
cupboards
large contruction area
home corner
open shelving
computer
carpet
small construction
bean bags
open shelving (books)
book corner
book shelves
"writing" corner
paint easels
open shelving (puzzles)
science display
water
shop + hairdressers
table (games)
craft table
sand
dough
outdoor play area
work bench
cloakroom + toilets
sink
Class M

CLASS I

School type: PRIMARY ; **No. on roll** = 300+ ; **No. in nursery class** = 30 (full-time)
Duration = 1-2 terms ; **Age** = 4 years ; **Years in operation** = 10 (infant classroom)

Environment

Location - catchment : mixed housing; suburban area; mixed SEGs; (all children in uniform); suburban
Buildings - age, condition : 1960s; fair condition

Classroom

Size : small (approx. 10x10 metres - headteacher (male) wanted to move class to a smaller room - nursery teacher refused)
Organisation of space : wet/messy area, book corner, home corner - work tables took up most space - teacher's desk
Facilities : sink unit, toilets outside in corridor (shared); no outdoor area - use playground and have breaktimes at the same time as the rest of the school
Equipment and resources : condition varied; (NT "have to beg and borrow"); some stored in boxes, some on high shelving; TV

Staff

No. of trained staff (qualifications) : 1 nursery teacher (infant trained); 1 NNEB
No. of untrained staff : NNEB student every other week
Staff deployment : NNEB put out activities during carpet session; NT and NNEB sat at tables with small groups of children; NNEB washed up at end of session

Curriculum

Content : concentration on number and language work (NT does the same programme each term so that the children do the same topics twice!); start made on school maths and reading schemes
National Curriculum influence : no
Pressures from other staff : no pressure from staff; headteacher checks weekly plans - insists that nursery class follows main school timetable for breaks

Teaching and Learning Styles

How children learn : some free choice; adult direction at activity tables; formal academic input
Organisation of session : (pm) carpet session - action rhymes, registration - (15 mins); free choice of activities for some, other children sat at tables with NNEB (craft activity) and with NT (reading and writing); nursery teacher explained that morning session was more formal (maths schemes etc.); story
Management of learning : tables are numbered and activities are changed each day on a rota; similarly sand and water toys are changed on a weekly basis (5 week rota); tick lists of activities completed
Children's contact with adults : those at tables had adult input; those making choices had no contact
Management of behaviour : NT warm, smiles; NNEB quite severe; the noise level was high but the children responded immediately when the nursery teacher asked them to stop what they were doing (not fully engaged? - awaiting instructions?)
Activities in which the children were engaged : those who were not working with adults were observed to be lying around in the book corner without books; starting puzzles and walking away before completing them; throwing objects out of the home corner; wandering

Assessment and Record Keeping

How children are assessed : assessed through the maths and language scheme
Types of records kept : records of work in maths and language scheme sent to reception teacher

Parental Involvement

Parents' involvement in work of nursery class : no parental help in the classroom; some parents help to make things for the class; children take reading books home
Arrangements for parent/staff meetings : open evenings (parents do not come into classroom at start or end of session)
Transition from home to nursery : children come in over a 3 day period (NT would like to take up to 2 weeks in order to allow each group to settle, but headteacher insists that they are all in school within 3 days)

Entry into School

Integration with main school : PE in main hall; liaison with reception teacher
Transition from nursery class to reception class : make several visits during term before entry

CLASS M

School type: FIRST ; **No. on roll** = 100+ ; **No. in nursery class** = 22 am and 21 pm (part-time)

Duration = 2 terms ; **Age** = 4 years ; **Years in operation** = new - 1 term+ (conversion)

Environment

Location - catchment : private housing nearby, but most children come from a large council estate; 30% ethnic minority (according to the headteacher (male), many of the more middle class parents in the area do not send their children to the school); generally lower SEGs; outskirts of town

Buildings - age, condition : 1960s; recently completely refurbished (double glazed, carpeted, plants etc.)

Classroom

Size : infant classroom adapted for nursery provision

Organisation of space : organised into areas through the placement of cupboards and racks etc.; few tables and chairs (craft table, "writing" table in "office", table with threading activity), home corner, shop, hairdresser's shop, wet/messy area

Facilities : toilets shared with reception class; outdoor play area (hard) with ride-on toys; kitchen area

Equipment and resources : much new equipment in excellent condition, puzzles, games and construction apparatus arranged on low shelving and open stacking trays for easy child access

Staff

No. of trained staff (qualifications) : 1 nursery teacher (infant trained - part MA in Early Years completed)- also County Multicultural Adviser; 1 NNEB

No. of untrained staff : 1 NNEB student; language assistant; 1 voluntary assistant (one day per week)

Staff deployment : voluntary assistant supported children at craft table; NNEB student at dough table; language assistant at threading table; NT circulated

Curriculum

Content : still trying to work on this; start with a book from which a theme may develop; follow children's interests; trying to build in assessment

National Curriculum influence : not as such - aware of it

Pressures from other staff : none - headteacher (male- wife County Primary Inspector) very supportive

Teaching and Learning Styles

How children learn : free choice of activities

Organisation of session : children started on activities as soon as they came into nursery - free choice for approx. 1 hour; carpet session with NNEB- rhymes (10 mins.); changed for PE in main school hall; returned and dressed; milk on carpet; short free choice session; story

Management of learning : through observation and support

Children's contact with adults : much adult contact; ratio 1:4

Management of behaviour : very quiet, warm, lots of cuddles

Activities in which the children were engaged : painting, making own models (cardboard);, home corner, sand, construction

Assessment and Record Keeping

How children are assessed : working on assessment and trying various methods

Types of records kept : samples of "work" so far

Parental Involvement

Parents' involvement in work of nursery class : parents are asked to stay for one session in order to find out what is going on; booklets written in English and Urdu

Arrangements for parent/staff meetings : contact everyday; free to arrange meetings at any time; open evenings

Transition from home to nursery : parents stay for first session; all children start together; have thought about home visits, but no time

Entry into School

Integration with main school : use main hall for PE; assembly once each week

Transition from nursery class to reception class : has not been attempted yet

Appendix A3

Staff interview framework

FRAMEWORK OF QUESTIONS FOR STAFF INTERVIEWS

1. Can you first tell me something about your teaching background and your experience in nursery/early years education?

This question arose from the fact that the survey had highlighted the importance of specialist training and its effects on style of teaching and learning, and the relationship between training and the degree to which nurseries were open to parents. I also wanted to explore any relationships between previous experience in education/nursery care and staff perceptions of nursery education, different groups of parents and different types of nursery provision (if they had been involved in these).

2. What do you consider to be the main purpose of nursery education?

This question would seek staff opinions which might thus be compared with parental perceptions.

3. What are your aims and objectives in providing nursery education?

Since there was insufficient time to discuss aims and objectives during the survey visits, this topic was included on the interview schedule. Aims and objectives of different members of staff might then be compared and relationships between aims and objectives and perceptions of quality explored.

4. Would your aims and objectives be different in a nursery with a different type of catchment area to this one?

I added this hypothetical question, since in the survey, some staff had indicated certain preconceived ideas about some groups of parents and children with regard to the their levels of interest and the extent of their advantage/disadvantage, culturally and linguistically. I wanted to explore this issue further.

5. What are your views on parental involvement?

I wanted to compare my observations of parent-staff interactions with staff opinions on parental involvement.

6. How would you define 'quality' in nursery education?

A major research question, responses to which might be compared with those of parents and those definitions evident in the literature.

7. What are your views *on the* nursery voucher system which the Government hopes to introduce?

As for parents, this question was one of topical interest at the time of the study. I wanted to explore staff opinions on the effect the system might have upon provision and on 'quality' in nursery education.

Appendix A4

Parent interview framework

FRAMEWORK OF QUESTIONS FOR PARENT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

1. What for you and your child is the purpose of nursery education?

2. Do your children talk to you about what they do in nursery class?

This question was asked only if parents did not mention that their children talked to them.

3. What were your experiences of school?

Again, this question was asked only if parents did not make mention of their own experiences at school. It arose as a result of the analysis of interviews at Harrington.

4. Did your children go to playgroup before they came here? Was that different?

5. Did your children attend day nurseries? Was that different?

Questions 3 and 4 were used to explore parents' perceptions of other types of pre-school provision in order to contextualise their perceptions of nursery education.

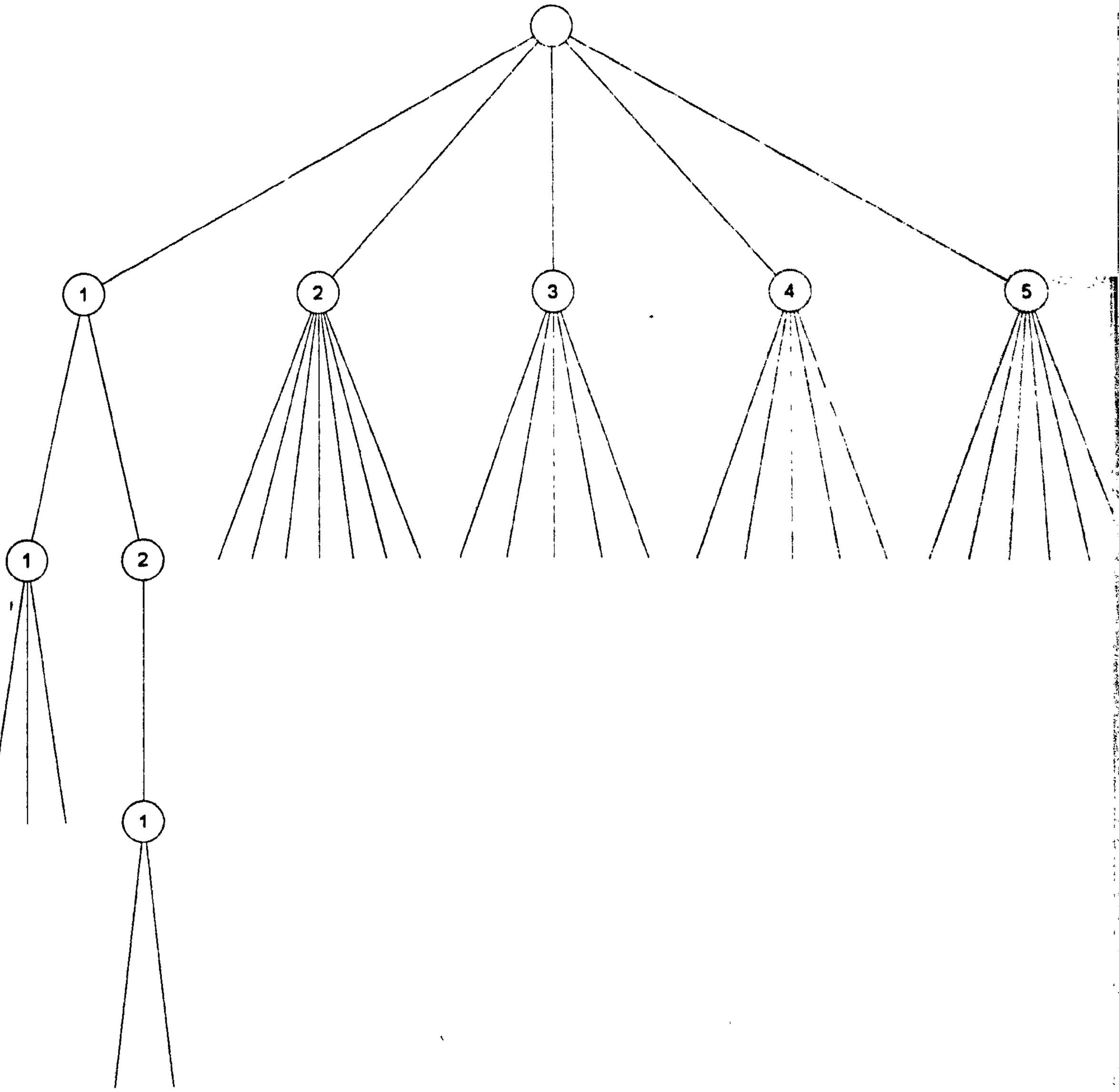
6. What would you say is meant by 'quality' in nursery education?

7. The Government has announced that it intends to give parents vouchers which they can use to obtain nursery education for their children. What's your opinion on that?

More details of the voucher system were explained to parents at Harrington since there had been no media coverage at that time.

Appendix A5

- NUD.IST category trees.
- Setting up base data for first two nursery classes.
- Interrogating the index system.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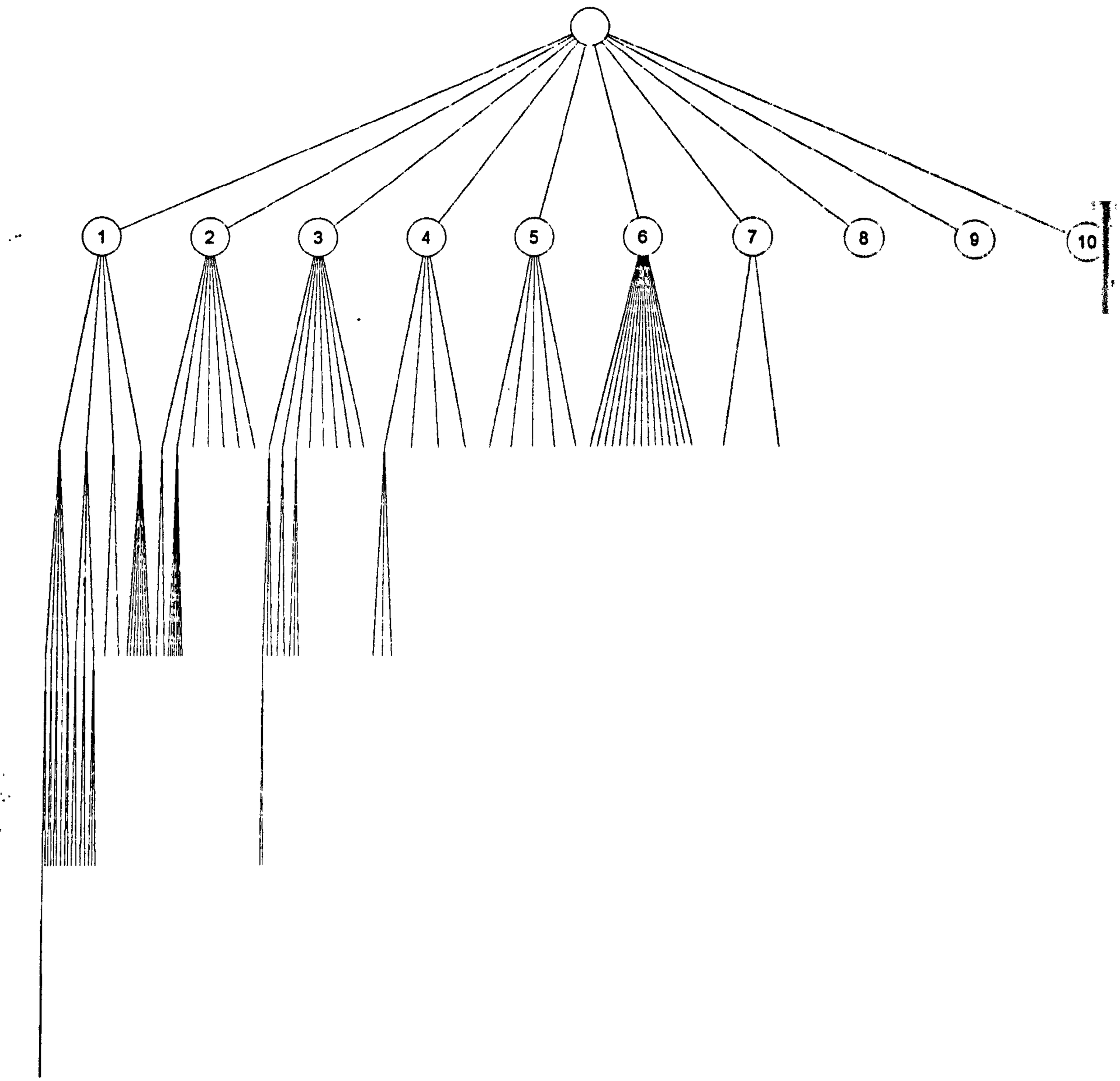
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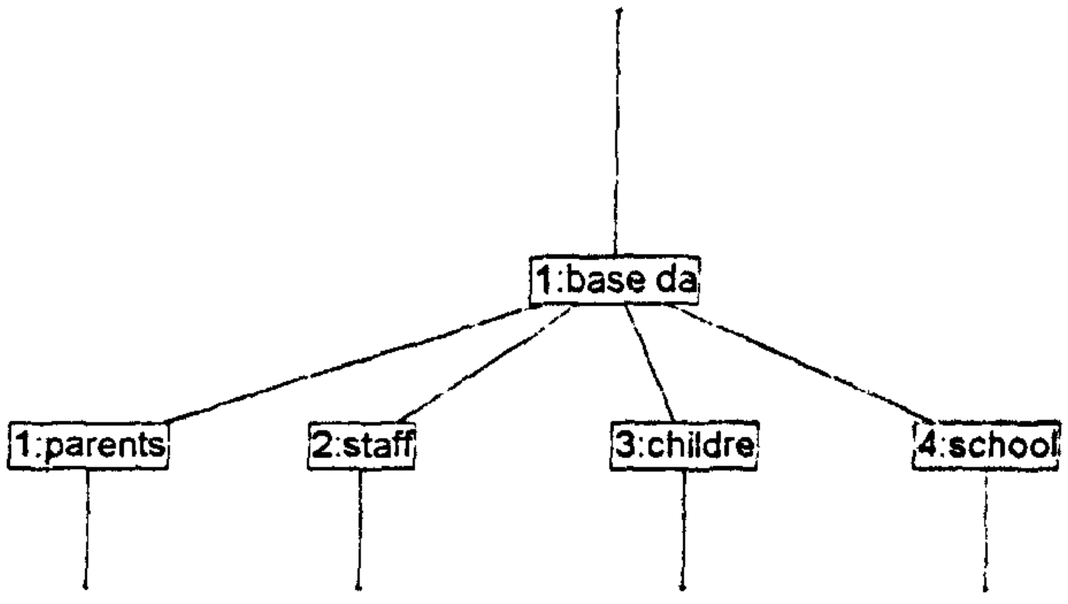
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1:parents
2:staff
3:childre
4:school

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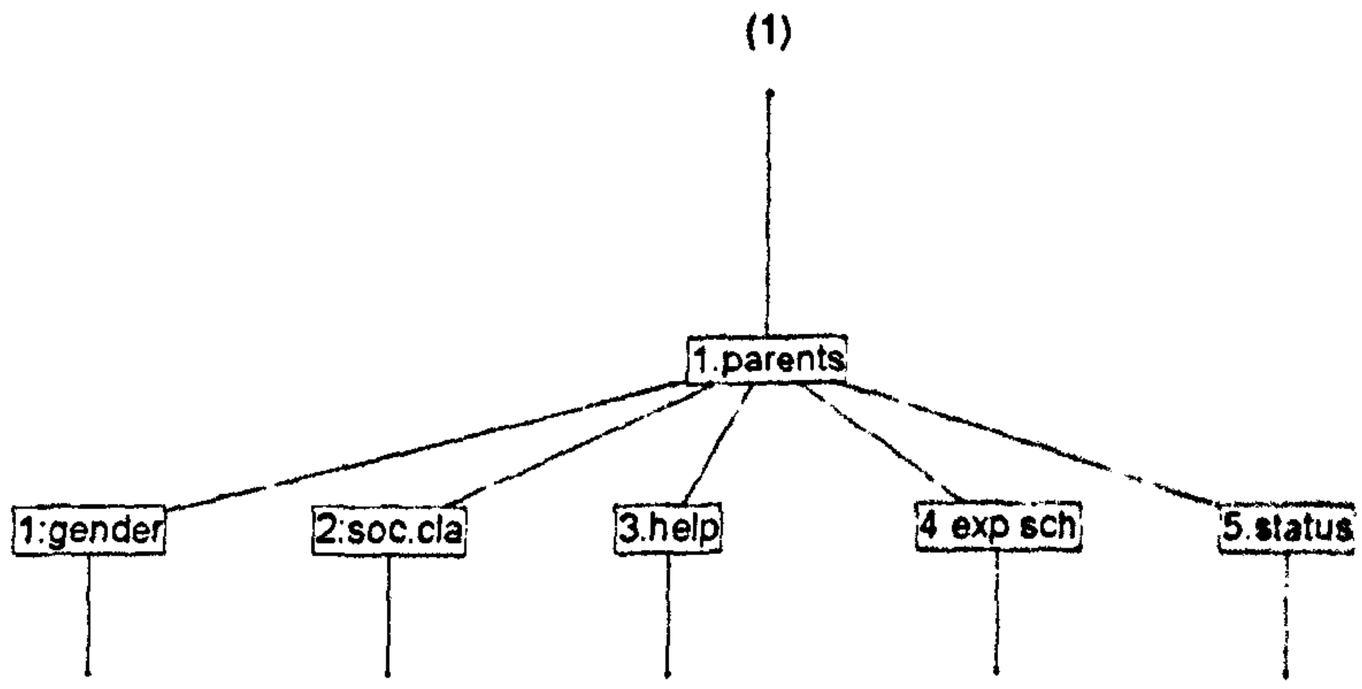
1.parents
1:gender
2:soc.cla
3.help
4 exp sch
5.status

Setting up base data for the first *two* classes visited

Working with node (1 2) - 'staff' - I created 3 child nodes as follows:-

node address	name
(1 2 1)	headteach
(1 2 2)	NNEB
(1 2 3)	nteachers

All relevant documents (transcribed interviews) were indexed at these nodes. In order that differences in male and female responses might be explored, child nodes (1 2 1 1) 'female' and (1 2 1 2) 'male' were created and the relevant documents indexed. Similarly, child nodes were created at (1 2 2) 'NNEB' for experienced (1 2 2 1) and newly qualified (1 2 2 2) NNEBs, indexing relevant documents. The following child nodes were created at (1 2 3) 'nteachers' (nursery teachers):-

(1 2 3 1) - 'trained' - interview data for nursery teachers who were initially teacher-trained for the nursery age-group were indexed at this node.

(1 2 3 2) - 'inset' - interview data for staff who were not initially teacher-trained for the nursery age group, but had received inservice training were indexed at this node.

(1 2 3 3) - ' not trained' - interview data for staff who were not initially teacher-trained for the nursery age group and had had little or no inservice training were indexed at this node.

Sub-categories of the child node (1 3) 'children' were created at (1 3 1) 'girls' and (1 3 2) 'boys'; relevant **text units** (selected through the highlighting procedure) were indexed at these nodes, in order that possible differences in perceptions might be explored.

A *parent node* was created for 'school' data (1 4) to which 4 *child nodes* were attached:-

(1 4 1) - 'schA' - at which were indexed all interviews conducted in School A (Harrington).

(1 4 2) - 'schJ' - at which were indexed all interviews conducted in School J (Catsbury).

Data for Fiddlebrooke were entered later, there being a break in data collection due to the restrictions placed on me by the headteacher regarding when I could go in to conduct the research. Descriptions of the nursery classes were indexed at the relevant nodes - (1 4 3) 'Adescrip' and (1 4 4) 'Jdescrip'. Two extra nodes were created which would bear data relating to the classes' openness to parents - (1 4 5), 'open' and (1 4 6) 'not open', since the relationship of this factor and to parent, child and staff perceptions might require exploration.

The largest sub-tree to be produced was that of node (1 1) 'parents'. Firstly, (1 1 1) was created and attached to (1 1) as a **'parent node'** for 2 sub-

nodes, (1 1 1 1) 'female' and (1 1 1 2) 'male' so that differences in mothers' and fathers' perceptions might be explored. Similarly, a **'parent node'** was created for social class, (1 1 2) 'soc.class', attached to which were two sub-nodes (1 1 2 1) 'workclass' and (1 1 2 2) 'midclass'. I began indexing text at these nodes by highlighting text units of relevant speakers, but, after doing this several times, I realised that all which had been said by, for example 'working class' parents, could be accessed by doing a **pattern text search**. The names of the speakers who were 'working class' were, therefore, put into a pattern search so that all text units for those speakers were found automatically. The **text finds** were, at first, **spread** to include 5 units on either side, so that units could be examined in context, and were then **merged** to appropriate nodes. However, I soon realised that **spreading** the text units after the search was an error, since data irrelevant to a particular node description would be merged into the node; this would cause problems and inaccuracies later when doing index system searches. I therefore had to delete this data from the node, repeat the pattern search and merge the search to the relevant node(s) without spreading the text units.

Nodes were created for interview data of parents who had helped in the classroom at some stage (1 1 3) and those who had not helped (1 1 4) so that differences in perceptions might be explored. Relevant text units were indexed at these nodes.

I then created a node for single parents (1 1 5) and indexed all 'single parent' data in this position. However, I then realised I would need to generate a node for married parents, and therefore needed to create a parent node named 'status' at (1 1 5), so that nodes for these two variables could be attached to that. Deleting (1 1 5) 'single' would have meant losing the data indexed at that node and, therefore, I adopted the following procedure which gave me practice in redesigning a sub-tree: I cut node (1 1 5) 'single' and temporarily attached it to node (1 1 3). Then I created a new node (1 1 5) 'status'. The 'single' node was then cut from its temporary position at (1 1 3) and attached to the new 'status' node, thus becoming (1 1 5 5). A second child node was then created at (1 1 5), 'married' (1 1 5 1) and relevant text units indexed to that.

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Interrogating the index system

My first search was a simple intersection. Firstly, I asked a broad question - "What do working class mothers say about nursery education?" Node (1 1 1 1) - "female" was intersected with node (1 1 2 1) - "working class". I cross-referenced nodes, but did not ask for node titles. However, once the search had been made and placed on the clipboard, I spread the text before attaching it to the working node. This was a mistake in that I was then faced with text units which included middle class parents comments. I therefore deleted the indexing on the working node and repeated the search. The results of the search were then attached to the working node (6) and retrieved in text form by selecting "make report"; the text was then printed out. This search was very broad, but had simply been used for the purpose of practice in interrogating the index tree. I decided to do similar searches for "working class" fathers, "middle class" mothers and "middle class" fathers.

Having gained a little confidence in simple interrogation, I moved on to ask slightly more complex questions. I decided to explore any differences between working class and middle class parents' perceptions on the purpose and aims of nursery education with regard to academic skills. My first question in this category was "Do working class mothers perceive academic skills as an outcome of nursery education?" and therefore intersected (2 3) - *purpose, academic* with (1 1 2 1) *working class* and (1 1 1 1) *female.* I put the results of the search directly on to the working node, retrieved the text with cross-referencing of node addresses and their descriptions, and obtained a print-out. While the search was still on the clipboard, I spread the text so that I could see the retrieved text units in context and then attached it to the working node as a separate child node. I retrieved the text, this time without cross-referencing, and obtained a print-out. This procedure seemed to work well since the result was two hard copies of the search - one giving me parents' quotes together with cross-referencing so that I had a description of the parents who had made the comments (class, gender, school etc.) and a second copy placing the comments in context.

Having practised interrogating the data through intersections, I decided to look for generalised relationships by using the program facility for matrix construction. In this way a greater number of categories could be compared and/or interrelated in one search and retrieval. When asking NUD.IST to construct a matrix, the child nodes below two or more chosen nodes are utilised and compared. I first asked the question "In what way do respondents in different social groups perceive that nursery education prepares children for school?" and selected node (2 1) - *ready for school* to be intersected with (1 1 2) - *social class.* Hence, all the child nodes for these nodes would be considered in the matrix i.e. *routine* and *emotional* against *working* and *middle class.*

Appendix A6

Information relating to parents who took part in the focus groups

The Parents

Harrington

Group 1

Jemma - mid-twenties, married, mother at home - full-time carer [MAH], three children (4 years, 3 years and 18 months), council tenant.

Jane - late twenties; one daughter; 8 months pregnant (had been doing part-time office work); homeowner.

Laura - late twenties, married, MAH, two children (4 and 2 years), homeowner.

Group 2

Yvette, late twenties, married, MAH, three children, (4 years, 2 years and 6 months), council tenant.

Janet - late twenties, married (at 16), MAH, five children (4-11 years), council tenant.

Tricia - mid-twenties, MAH, a single parent of one boy, and living in a council flat opposite the school.

Group 3

Victor - early thirties, married, a car park security guard, two children (6 and 4 years), council tenant.

Simon - early thirties, married, a salesman, three children (9, 7 and 4 years), council tenant.

Catsbury

Group 1

Elizabeth - late thirties, married, MAH and a part-time cleaner, three children (18, 16 and 4 years), council tenant.

Daphne - late twenties, married, MAH, two children, (9 and 4 years), council tenant.

Christine - late thirties, married, MAH, three children, (20, 18 and 4 years), council tenant.

Anita - late twenties, married, MAH, two children, (8 and 4 years), homeowner.

Group 2

Evelyn - a multiple sclerosis sufferer in her mid-thirties, MAH, married, council tenant, whose only child (a daughter aged 4 years) entered nursery six months early because of her mother's condition.

Rosemary - early twenties, unmarried, single parent, MAH, two children (6 and 4 years), council tenant.

Tara - mid-thirties, married, MAH, five children (4-12 years), homeowner

Deborah - early thirties, married, two children (4 and 2 years), part-time office worker (clerical), homeowner.

Group 3

Colin - mid-thirties, married, a shift worker at a local factory, four children, council tenant.

George - mid-thirties, a subpostmaster and grocer, married, two children, homeowner.

Bill - mid-thirties, unemployed, two children (6 and 4 years), council tenant.

Fiddlebrooke

Group 1

Jeff - described himself as a 'househusband', had given up his job in a factory to look after his two boys (4 and 2 years - new baby due during the week following the interview) because his wife's salary as a nurse was better than his own; homeowner.

Kathy - early thirties, married, MAH, three children (7 years, 4 years and 10 months), homeowner.

'Group' 2

Judith - early thirties, married, MAH, two children (4 and 2 years), a homeowner, (worked for the LEA before having her children (clerical) and was chairwoman of the local playgroup).

Group 3

Pat - mid-thirties, married, MAH, two children (8 and 4 years), homeowner.

Sue - mid-thirties, married, MAH, four children (6, 4 and 3 years, and 11 months), homeowner.